

Five Dials



NUMBER 25B

The Cork Fiction Issue 2: Cork Harder

FEATURING

NATHAN ENGLANDER

FRANK O'CONNOR

WITI IHIMAERA

*... Plus artwork (in colour this time) by Jeannie Phan, fiction from John F. Deane
and Tania Hershman and a little more ...*



CONTRIBUTORS

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TANIA HERSHMAN's first collection of short stories and flash fiction, *The White Road and Other Stories*, was commended in the 2009 Orange Award for New Writers. Her second collection, *My Mother Was an Upright Piano*, was recently published by Tangent Books. She is currently writer-in-residence in the Science Faculty at Bristol University.

WITI IHIMAERA is a multi-award winning writer from New Zealand. He is the author of thirteen novels and six collections of stories. His 1987 novel, *The Whale Rider*, was made into an internationally acclaimed film in 2002 and an adaptation of his novella, *Medicine Woman*, will be released in 2013.

FRANK O'CONNOR was born in Cork on 17 September, 1903. A novelist, poet, dramatist, literary critic, essayist, travel writer, translator and biographer, O'Connor is perhaps best known for his short stories. Many of his classic stories such as 'My Oedipus Complex' and 'The Long Road to Ummerra', are regularly anthologized and his study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, continues to be read by budding short story writers around the world. The Frank O'Connor International Award is the world's most prestigious prize for a collection of short stories.

JEANNIE PHAN is a Toronto-based illustrator who works in acrylic gouache and ink. Her work includes the Brazilian cover of the Slavoj Žižek book *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. Her website can be found at jeanniephan.com.

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On Englander and Lists

And so, and thus, here we are in November, second Obama term confirmed, leaves turning, Christmas displays up, chill in the air, abandoned Boris bikes on the pavement of the Strand, a giant reindeer shrubbery in Covent Garden along with a few shivering human statues standing on the corner of Floral Street.

As promised, this is the second part of the Cork short story issue. We've got a Frank O'Connor story from the archives as well as fiction from Nathan Englander: proof that sometimes, when given access to the writing of Englander, it's important to quickly grab the story and stick it into the next issue, just in case someone out there in the far reaches of our subscription list has not yet read his work. We'd hate to think that someone, somehow missed out on his latest book, *What We Talk about When We Talk About Anne Frank*, which he read from when we were in Cork. The story you'll find in this issue is proof of Englander's devotion to the form. It carries more weight than any short story should feasibly be able to hold; it's as if the text was hewn from stone. Read on. Be amazed. To counterbalance the seriousness, and to keep you apprised of our recent fixations and fascinations, we've also included another of our occasional *Five Dials* lists, where all the editors write down what they've been ingesting, as if we'd become one large culture-gulping entity. Here's what's been filling our world:

Reading

- Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (amazing)
- *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (bizarre)
- Neil Young's *Waging Heavy Peace*
- Gay Talese's *Fame and Obscurity*
- George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (a great reminder that no matter how bad circumstances get for a writer in London, they can always somehow get worse.)
- *The Polish Boxer* - Eduardo Halfon
- *The London A-Z*
- *The Invisible Man* - HG Wells
- Paul Thek: *Artist's Artist* (and Sontag's friend)
- *Crafts of the Weimar Bauhaus*
- Michelangelo's Poetry (via Ali Smith)

Foodstuffs

- Polo mints
- Nicorette gum (4 mgs)
- Ibuprofen
- Benylin
- Strepsils Extra-Strength blackcurrant lozenges
- Chocolate cake

Films

- *The Imposter* - Bart Layton.
- *Anna Karenina* Verdict: mixed.
- Sion Sono's *Himizu* (remarkable post-Tohoku film about recovery and identity)
- *Skyfall*
- *Ghostbusters*

- *Ghostbusters 2*
- And we are looking forward to *Amour* - Michael Haneke

Music

- Melancholy piano music, especially Erik Satie
- Ronnie Lane and Slim Chance
- Townes Van Zandt's *Texas Troubadour*
- Old, old stuff for the renovated record player: The Boogie Woogie Trio; Django Reinhardt; Junior Walker and the All Stars
- Talking Heads - *Stop Making Sense*
- Cinderella - *Long Cold Winter*

Youtube

- Rosie Perez taking on Mitt Romney
- Rosie Perez dancing on old Soul Train clips
- Rosie Perez dancing in the *Do The Right Thing* credit sequence
- Rosie Perez dancing to anything at all

Exhibits

- William Klein x Daido Moriyama at the Tate Modern
- Francis Upritchard at Nottingham Contemporary
- Dr Lakra at Kate MacGarry

Websites

- Des Jeunes Gens Modernes
- The Olympia Press

Theatre:

- Interesting production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* at the Barbican, en francais, avec Juliette Binoche and (thankfully) surtitles.
- *Ghostbusters 2* (a musical, in development)

Others

- Keeping as up-to-date on the US elections as possible through its most inane byproducts - from Will Ferrell's Obama endorsement to Best Instagrams/GIFs of Election Day.
- The Onion's Joe Biden fan fiction



Under The Skin

Witi Ihimaera on the making of the film Medicine Woman

I. A SICKLY CHILD

When I was born, I was my mother Julia's first child. I was premature, a sickly child with chronic breathing problems. According to her, the Pakeha obstetrician who delivered me didn't think I would live beyond my first year.

This was in the early 1940s, and on her release from Gisborne maternity hospital my mother took me to other Pakeha doctors. There was a certain amount of desperation about this: she always used to say to me, 'I held you in my arms,' as if that explained everything.

When those doctors could not help me, my mother finally turned to her own Maori community of faith healers including a well-known tohunga, a Ringatu priest known as Hori Gage. I know all this because survival narratives are always central to any family and, compared to my brothers and sisters, although I was the eldest, I was the sickly runt of the bunch; still am. And, of course, because I was therefore prone to all the ills and sicknesses of the world, my mother's stories of my survival were dispensed with all the cod liver oil, malt and other less mentionable concoctions and therapies which she plagued me with as a boy. (Much later, it was intimated to me by another Maori seer that I would not live beyond the age of thirty, which seemed to affirm the doom and gloom with which my early life was surrounded; every year since, I have considered a bonus.)

My father's approach to my sickness was much more practical, even if wrong. He has always been robust, refusing to believe in mollycoddling and instead favouring fresh air, open windows, cold baths, and the like; he applied his own remedies to get me well including one that was popular among Maori in those days: dabbing benzine on a cloth and getting me to inhale it; it is a wonder I didn't turn into a petrol head.

Finally, having exhausted all the Pakeha and Maori avenues that she knew, my mother took me to a travelling medicine

woman whom she heard had arrived at a small village near Gisborne. 'She was known as Paraiti,' my mother told me, 'or Blightface, because she had a red birthmark over the left half of her face. Like Hori Gage, she was a Ringatu lady, a follower of the prophet Te Kooti's spiritual ways.'

According to Mum, I was bundled up in blankets and she and Dad drove through the backblocks of Poverty Bay to Whatatutu where Paraiti was going about her work: among the stories of babyhood, this was the one that I could imagine fully, stars wheeling above, anxious white-faced parents speeding down dusty roads looking for a scarred witch doctor, you know the sort of thing.

This must have been around 1946, and the work of such women (and men) was illegal and frowned upon; I understood that Paraiti had been jailed a few times and practised in a clandestine fashion. When my mother finally found her and delivered me to her for inspection, was Paraiti welcoming?

No, first she intimidated my mother with her scar and then scolded her by saying, 'You should have come straight to me instead of going to Pakeha doctors. Why do you think I will be successful when they haven't been?'

Paraiti must have been in her seventies by then. She had been a girl during the Land Wars and had lived through the flu epidemic of 1918 and seen many changes as New Zealand became colonized. Grumpy though she was, she looked at me, said she would treat me and, from what Mum told me, for the next few days kept me in a makeshift tent filled with steam treated with herbs. Every now and then she drizzled manuka honey down my throat.

'Some days later,' my mother told me, 'Paraiti then began to karakia, to pray, and, as she did so, she hooked her finger into your throat and pulled out threads of phlegm.'

From this childhood survival story came the novella *Medicine Woman*, published in 2006, and now the film of the

novella, directed by Mexican director Dana Rotberg, will be released in 2013. It will be the third feature film to be made from my work after *Whale Rider* in 2002 and *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* in 2010 (known as *Kawa* for its American release in 2011). In both the novella and film I kept the name of Paraiti for the medicine woman.

I have tried to recreate her late nineteenth-century and early to mid twentieth-century world in the first half of the narrative, which follows her travels with horse, mule and dog throughout the wilderness tribal lands of my childhood. For instance, these are the rongoa (medicines) of her trade: they include kumarahou for asthma; waoriki for arthritis; ake, kareao, miro or rimu gum for bleeding and haemorrhaging; hakekakeha or harakeke roots for blood cleansing and to promote regular blood functions; mingimingi, the mamaku pith and punga fern pith for scrofulous tumours, abscesses and boils; kawakawa for bronchitis and catarrh; weka oil, kowhai and bluegum juice for bruises, sprains and aching bones; harakeke and kauri gum to treat burns; puwha and mimihua gum for mouth and teeth ailments; harakeke for chilblains and bad circulation; houhere and tawa for colds; titoki for constipation; piupiu for cramp; wood charcoal for dandruff; koromikobuds for diarrhoea and dysentery; eel oil for earache; powdered moss for eczema and scabies; kaikaiatua as an emetic; pirita for epilepsy; seaweed for goitre; paewhenua for haemorrhoids; pipipiri for urinary health; fernroot and convolvulus roots for lactation; flax-leaf juice for sciatica; huainanga as an emetic to expel tapeworms; manuka honey for healing poultices and internal ailments of the digestive tract; and so on.

Paraiti shuns Pakeha utensils and keeps to traditional ones: wooden sticks and scrapers, sharp-edged shells and obsidian flakes for cutting, thorns for opening up abscesses, stones to heat before placing on the body, lacy houhere bark and cobwebs as poultices and dressings, palm-tree splints for broken bones, kakahaka fibre for bandaging and various oils for massaging.

For any major bone-setting that requires steam treatment, Paraiti organizes times at a makeshift spa. Her father has given her special knowledge of the various massages to heal and knit broken bones.

He has also taught her therapeutic massage for the elderly; he himself loved nothing better than to submit himself to Paraiti's strong kneading and stroking of his body to keep his circulation going. 'Daughter,' he sighs, 'you have such goodness in your hands.'

And, of course, there is a sequence in which a young boy has manuka honey drizzled down his throat to clear it so that he can breathe.

Paraiti is an agent of life. She saves. She heals. She prolongs.

2. MERLE OBERON WAS A MAORI

However, I felt that in Paraiti's narrative she needed a moral dilemma, something which challenges her purpose and her thinking: a confrontation with all she values and a request not to save a life but to take it.

In the second part of her story, therefore, I introduce a character named Mrs Rebecca Vickers, a young Pakeha woman in her twenties, belonging to high society, who asks Paraiti for an abortion.

Mrs Vickers and her maidservant, Maraeta, in her fifties and a Maori, are not what they seem to be. In particular, Mrs Vickers has a lot at stake: if the baby is born, and if it is of dark complexion, people will realize that she is a Maori.

This is where I have interpolated the story of actress Merle Oberon. It provides the heart of darkness to *Medicine Woman*.

I had long been fascinated by Merle Oberon, ever since reading *Merle: A Biography of Merle Oberon* by Charles Higham and Roy Moseley (New English Library, 1983). All her life she lived a lie. She told the press that she had been born in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, and, in later life, 1965, unwittingly found herself in Sydney when she accompanied her then husband Bruno Pagliai, one of the richest men in Latin America, on an inaugural flight of Aeronaves de Mexico. Invited to attend a banquet in her honour at Government House, Hobart, she first accepted, fainted and cancelled; she was only in Australia seventy-two hours.

Why the lie? Well, Merle Oberon had a lot to hide. She was after all one of the most beautiful women of her generation, a famous film actress with a fabulous almond-shaped face and slanting eyes set

into a complexion of flawless whiteness. In a film career which spanned from 1930 to 1973, her electrifying beauty was highlighted in over fifty British, French, US and Mexican film roles including Anne Boleyn to Charles Laughton's Henry in *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, 1933, Cathy to Laurence Olivier's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, 1939, George Sand to Cornel Wilde's Chopin in *A Song to Remember*, 1945, and the Empress Josephine to Marlon Brando's Napoleon in *Désirée*, 1954. People thought she had discovered the fountain of youth because as she grew older she seemed to become more beautiful.

Merle Oberon achieved much more than a film career. In a life characterized by steely determination, sexual charisma and force of will, she climbed to the heights of the international jet set, becoming one of the leading hostesses for her multimillionaire husband, lavishly entertaining princes and presidents at their sumptuous home in Mexico. Higham and Moseley are of the view that she dominated not only Hollywood but the society of her generation.

All this . . . and yet she was the second daughter of a Eurasian girl, born on 19 February 1911 not in Tasmania, Australia, but Bombay, India.

This was the passage of description of Merle Oberon's mother in Higham and Moseley's book which took my attention: 'Her name is Charlotte Constance Selby . . . She is a Christian girl, part Irish, part Singhalese, with Maori strains in her blood . . .' (*Merle: A Biography of Merle Oberon*, p. 3). The future actress was christened Estelle Merle, her father was Arthur O'Brien Thompson, and the name Merle Oberon was fashioned out of her second Christian name and her father's first surname, O'Brien.

When Merle Oberon became famous, her mother and father, as well as her elder sister, conspired to keep the truth of her Eurasian origins from the public. According to Higham and Moseley, cinematographers found ways of filming her so that her naturally dark skin and looks would be obscured. One such was the famed Gregg Toland, cameraman of *Citizen Kane*, who poured the whitest and most blazing arc lights directly into her face, making her look almost transparently fair and removing any hint of her Indian skin texture.

Merle Oberon's mother Charlotte in fact lived with her daughter in Britain and

America, and *Merle: A Biography of Merle Oberon* quotes the following (p. 28), told by actress Diana Napier about an incident in the 1930s: 'One afternoon I was having tea with Merle at her flat near Baker Street when for the first time I saw this little, plump Indian woman come into the room dressed in a sari. She stood nervous, hesitantly, as though waiting for orders. Merle was extremely embarrassed. She spoke to her mother in Hindustani. The lady hardly said anything at all. She was very, very quiet.'

Charlotte Constance Selby died with her daughter at her bedside on 28 April 1937. Very few people knew that the Indian woman, called by her *ayah* or nanny Merle Oberon, had been her mother. Neither woman had, throughout Merle Oberon's long and illustrious career, ever given sign of family affection. To have done so would have destroyed the image of Merle Oberon's 'English rose' reputation at a time when women of colour faced harrowing prejudices and racism. In the British film industry, such a woman would never have made it to the front rank of actors – and would not have survived the furore if the truth had become known.

Soon after her mother's death, so Higham and Moseley tell us, Merle Oberon had a portrait painted of an unknown woman, with brown hair, blue eyes and white skin dressed in a period costume of some twenty years earlier. The paintings always hung in Merle's homes from then on and, when asked who the woman was, Merle Oberon always referred to the painting as being that of her mother.

And so, in the final part of *Medicine Woman*, Paraiti is involved in a battle of wills with Mrs Rebecca Vickers, whose life parallels that of Merle Oberon: as a Maori passing as Pakeha she, too, has much at stake.

The battle is over the life of an unborn child: how will Paraiti be able to save the child and not kill it? It is also, of course, over whose history will succeed, identity, race, skin colour and the choices many men and women of ethnicity faced when trying to survive within European society before it re-balanced itself.

On my part, the narrative is also to honour my mother and the scar-faced lady she took me to. She was a lady I never knew called Paraiti. Dedicated to life, she saved mine.

Sister Hills

by Nathan Englander

1: 1973

On a hilltop not many miles east of Jerusalem, Hanan Cohen watched the dust rising up in the distance and knew they were having a war. The roads remain empty on the Day of Atonement, and the cloud from a convoy barrelling down towards the desert could mean only one thing. Hanan put a hand to his eyes to block the sun, hoping to see better. Holding that position, with his beard blowing, and his long white robe, and the tallit on his shoulders, he looked – poised among those ancient hills – like a man outside of time. He walked back into the one-room shack where he lived with his wife and his three teenage sons. He undressed, put on his uniform, and took up his gun so that no one needed to ask what he had seen.

The boys said, ‘We will come, too.

There will be some way to help.’

‘Stay with your mother,’ Hanan said.

And Rena, who did not need her husband to make such a decision, said, ‘Follow your father to the city, and see if there’s any way you may serve your country in its time of need.’

Hanan nodded, accepting. And he, along with his three boys, walked out towards the war.

Rena did not sleep that night, worried as she was for her husband and her sons. The worry was made worse by the newness of the place and its simplicity. Centred in the middle of an olive grove, the shack was without running water or electricity. Whatever radio signal wasn’t swallowed by the surrounding mountains was blocked by the trees. A home so rustic wasn’t wired for a phone.

When Rena broke her fast after dark, she thought about hiking down across the little valley out her front door and climbing the hill on the other side. For on that other small summit sat another shack, with another family. The only Jews for miles around. In it lived a husband and wife and their new baby daughter. The husband, Skote, was a friend of Hanan’s, and together they’d come up with the

plan, and bought the land, and decided to settle this area of Samaria together, and build from their two families a great and mighty city on that place.

Rena figured that Skote, too, had seen the dust. And that, most sensibly, Yehudit had taken her baby daughter and followed her husband to the closest road when he’d left to join the fight. Rena sincerely hoped that’s what she’d done. At the best of times, this was not a safe place to be alone. There was a walkie-talkie in the shack, and Rena called out to Yehudit, but heard nothing on any of the channels, only broken flashes, like lightning, of passing chatter. Rena decided against crossing. She didn’t want to find herself alone on the opposite hilltop, only to have to make her way back in the night.

Rena sat with her back to the door and her eyes to the window. She recited psalms with her rifle in her lap, and watched for any movement that might be headed up her hill. She stayed this way until morning, frightened countless times by the rustling of leaves on stiff branches. And more so, she was terrified by what she could not see, the ever-widening gyre of frontier blocked by the tree at her window.

After washing her hands and saying her prayers, Rena went outside with the axe to size up the task ahead. It was the biggest tree in their grove, a solid four metres around. Then she looked up to its top and knew she could conquer it. For the tree, like the men of that country, was much shorter than you’d imagine for something so tough. Rena spat in her hands. She took up her axe, and she swung at the tree’s knobbly base with all she had. She chopped and chopped, making little progress. When she was feeling forlorn, too tired to hack at that stubborn bole any more, she’d look out past the tree over the edge of the hill at the Arab village below. And she’d swing.

Watching this handsome mother of three at work, her hair tied back in a kerchief, and reigning over this stunning hill, in a sea of hills, on a day so clear that one

could see well into the purple mountains of Moab from where Rena stood, you would not know that things weighed heavy at all. You would not know it if, upon taking her periodic look over the edge of that rocky slope and spotting a skinny young man climbing its worn, ancient terraces, she hadn’t buried that axe in the ground and lifted a rifle from the dirt.

Rena chambered a round. She planted the butt on her shoulder and set her sights on the boy zigzagging his way up. When he was close enough to Rena that she could have as easily poked him back down the hill with the barrel as shot him through the heart, he said, in Arabic, ‘Stop chopping my tree.’

Rena either didn’t speak Arabic or didn’t care to respond. And so the boy repeated the sentence in Hebrew.

Again, it was as if he had not spoken. Rena, as if starting the conversation, said, ‘Who are you?’

‘I am,’ he said, ‘your neighbour down the hill.’

‘Then stay down the hill,’ she said.

‘I would have,’ the boy said. ‘But I looked up and I saw that you were doing something that can’t be undone.’

‘It’s my tree, on my land, in my country. Mine to cut down if I please.’

‘If it was your tree, I’d have seen you at my side last year during harvest. I’d have seen you the year before that, and ten years before that, and a hundred.’

‘You weren’t here yourself a hundred years ago. And anyway,’ Rena said, ‘you don’t look back far enough. The contract on this land is very old.’

‘A mythical claim, as meaningless as the one you make today.’

Here the boy went silent as the shadows from a formation of fighters passed overhead. Then he waited a moment longer, for he knew they would be followed by the crack of broken sky.

‘You will see,’ the boy said. ‘The Jewish court will return this hill to us. Anyway, it looks like it’s the war, not a judge, that will decide. Tomorrow, I’d say, or the next, this tree will be in Jordan, or Egypt, or, God willing, back home in Palestine.’

‘By tomorrow,’ Rena said, ‘it will be at the bottom of the hill. And you can take it, along with your family, to any country you please.’

Here the boy’s face darkened, as if a

plane again had passed, though the sky stayed clear.

'If I find one single olive branch off this tree at the bottom of the hill,' he said, a finger now raised, 'I will plant you in its place myself. One more swing, I tell you, and a curse on your head – a curse on your home.'

'You are very tough for a boy with a gun aimed at his heart.'

'A settler who shoots for no reason would already have shot.'

And here the boy turned and walked back down the hill. He was halfway down when Rena called to him, against her better judgement. 'Child,' she yelled. 'Cousin! Are we really losing the war?'

Rena chopped at that tree for the rest of the morning. With each swing, she thought of the boy's curse, and the boy's threat, and wondered, if she felled the tree that day, if he'd really come for her that night. But that tree was a dense tree. And her axe needed sharpening. And as strong as she was, her arms would need strengthening, or at least a night of rest, to get the job done. When she knew she could not finish, Rena went back into the shack. She cleared her mug and plate from the table and tipped it on to its side. She then flipped it up against the window to act as a shutter, and turned her chair around to face the other side of the room. Rena sat with her back to the window, the gun in her lap, and her eyes set on a door so flimsy that when night came, she was able to see the stars through the gaps in its boards.

Deep into that night, there was a banging at the door that Rena was sure was the boy from the village come to get her. Cloudy with sleep, she was up in an instant, the gun at her shoulder, her finger on the trigger, and squeezing so hard in her fright that there was no way to stop it, when she remembered it might be her husband or her sons coming home. In that very same instant, for it was too small to split, she pitched up the barrel and shot a tile from her roof.

Rena heard her neighbour Yehudit scream on the other side of that door. She ran to open it, saying a dozen prayers at once, thankful she had not killed her friend. When Yehudit was safely inside with her baby, and the bolt slid back into place, Rena set the hive of a lantern to

glowing and held it out to the woman before her. And she saw that the baby Yehudit carried did not sit right in her arms. From the way she held it, Rena assumed that the child was already dead.

'Is she –' Rena said.

'Sick,' Yehudit said. 'A thousand degrees. I tried every remedy, said every prayer.' And then, in the middle of her panic, she said, 'Why did we move to this place? By whose call does it fall on us to rebuild this nation? Two families alone among olives and enemies. I said to Skote before all of this, "What if there is an emergency, and us cut off, no phones, no roads, only hills around? What if something happens after the baby is born?"'

'Do you want me to hike down with you?' Rena said, looking for a clock. 'We can be at the crossing before the sun comes up.'

'It's too far and too dangerous. And you can see already, the decision about this child's life will be made tonight.'

'Let me hold her,' Rena said. And she took the child, who was hot as white coal. Her lips were cracked deep and peeling like parchment, her little eyes dry and dead. Rena did not think this child could be saved. She handed the baby back to its mother, and took up the blanket that was folded on her cot.

'What are you doing?' Yehudit said.

'Making you a place to rest, so that I can care for the baby while you sleep. We will take turns nursing her through the night.'

'I didn't come for company. I didn't come to stay.'

'Well, what can I do that you haven't already done?'

'You can buy the child.'

'What?' Rena said.

'In the way of the old country – to outsmart what's coming. It's how my own grandmother was saved from the Angel of Death.'

'I'll recite psalms with you until the pages turn to dust,' Rena said, 'but superstition and magic?'

Yehudit put a hand to the back of the baby's head and turned away the shoulder on which the child rested, as if Rena herself were possibly Death in another guise.

'You don't see it?' Yehudit said. 'Why else, on Yom Kippur, would God call my husband away to war? To do that, and then reach into my home to take back the

blessing He'd just sent me? And this after I've left behind my whole family. This after I moved up to a forgotten hilltop, after I sacrificed happiness to make Israel whole. No, there has been a sin. There has been some evil of which I'm unaware. But it is my evil. This child, alone out here, utterly pure.'

'And you think selling your baby will break a fever that hot.'

'If she were not my child any more,' Yehudit said, 'if she meant so little to me that I'd sell her for a pittance. If she belonged, in earnest, to another mother, then maybe those forces that take interest would see that it is not worth the bother. And if she is truly no longer my child,' Yehudit said, owning whatever dark cloud hovered over her, 'maybe whatever's coming won't even know where to look.'

Rena nodded, accepting. She rummaged through a vegetable crate full of books for the one in which she and Hanan hid their money. She took out a stack of bills. This she offered to Yehudit, who took one worthless note off the top. '*Shtei prutot*,' Yehudit said. 'I won't take more money for her than I would for a loaf of bread.' Yehudit then gave that bill back to Rena and straightened herself, preparing for the exchange.

'I declare this child to be a daughter of this house,' Yehudit said. 'I make no claim to her any more.' She passed that boiling baby over to Rena, and in return took that single bill in her hand. 'I ask only,' Yehudit said, 'that you consider one humble request.'

'Yes?' Rena said, her eyes wet with the seriousness of the exchange.

'In making this deal binding, I ask that you let me spare you the burden of raising your daughter until she is a woman. I will watch over her as if I were her mother – though I am not. I will raise her with love and school her in the ways of Israel, and put her life before mine, if you grant me the right. Do you accept these terms?'

'I *don't*,' Rena said. And a terror washed over Yehudit's face. 'I will loan you my daughter until she is grown,' Rena said, 'but only if you both sleep here tonight. No daughter of mine can leave me so sick and head out into such a dark, cold night.'

'Of course, of course,' Yehudit said, stepping forward. 'A deal's a deal.' And here, Yehudit hugged Rena, with that

burning baby between them – too sick to cry. Into Rena’s ear, Yehudit whispered, ‘Let God protect our husbands in battle. And protect our country at war. Let God save this little daughter, and let God bless this house, and protect you always. And may He bless our new city, though it is now only two hovels on sister hills.’

‘Amen,’ Rena said. ‘Thank you,’ she said, and kissed her friend on the cheek.

Yehudit stepped back and wiped the tears from her face. ‘A silly superstition you may think,’ she said, ‘but I believe in the power of the word.’

Rena looked in the corner at all the milk bottles full of water. ‘When my boys used to get those terrible fevers, I would give them ice baths to cool them down.’

‘If I had ice,’ Yehudit said, ‘I’d have done it myself.’

‘There’s always a way to make do.’

Rena took up her gun and walked out to the northern edge of her property, where there was a high boulder that caught the wind. She climbed the boulder in the darkness – already familiar with its every crag. She took up a jerry can she kept there to cool when the temperature dropped, one she’d tuck in the shade each morning, her refreshment as she worked the land. Rena stood on that rock and screwed off the cap. She hoisted the container in the crook of an elbow, looking for any signs of fighting from Jordan. She tipped the can back and took a long swig. And she was comforted as the water sent a chill to her bones.

When Rena opened her eyes, she found herself in the chair, the gun in her lap, the psalms at her side, and her front door already open, letting in the morning. She went outside and discovered Yehudit sitting under a tree at the western edge of the hill, rocking the baby in her arms, a small machine pistol at her feet. Yehudit turned at Rena’s step and smiled up at her friend, and Rena knew from this that the baby had improved in the night.

‘Look’ is all Yehudit said, pointing out past her own shack on the opposite hill and down into the valley beyond. There, appearing and disappearing, as he blended into the terrain, an Israeli soldier in fatigues made his way towards them, flashing brightest when he unfurled his map and caught the sun.

‘A miracle,’ Rena said.

‘A miracle,’ Yehudit said. Rena first picked up her friend’s gun, then thought better about firing off a shot. She went back to the shack and returned with a flare, pulling off its cap, and then jumping and screaming and calling to the soldier. She waved that flare around, throwing it high off the edge of the hill. And he waved.

When the soldier, running double-time, reached the top off the hill, he put his hands to his knees to catch his breath, and then stood, wiping the sweat from his head with an arm.

‘A miracle that you should stumble by us,’ Rena said. ‘We have a sick baby, and a lady who needs to get to a clinic. Do you have a jeep? She cannot travel this way by foot.’

‘About a kilometre in from the road. That’s as far as I could go before the rise turned too steep.’

‘Take her,’ Rena said, giving him a shove. ‘Hurry down. Who knows how much time is left?’

‘I’ll take her,’ the soldier said, tucking his shirt in his pants and his pants in his boots before snapping to attention. ‘But first,’ he said, ‘which one of you is Rena Barak?’

Rena touched the soldier a second time, steadying herself against him. ‘Then I guess,’ she said, as Yehudit hurried over to help support her, ‘that this is no miracle for me.’

Rena accepted the news of her husband’s death and said, ‘Thank you, brave soldier. Now find my boys and tell them to bury their father. Their mother waits at home.’ And here she motioned for Yehudit to start down into the valley, so as not to slow them any further on their way.

‘There will be a funeral,’ the soldier said. ‘There is room in the jeep for all three.’

‘Look around you,’ she said. ‘Our great settlement is two houses and two families. For both mothers to leave would be to lose everything we’ve started building. Our neighbours from down the hill will be back up in an instant. And a more unforgivable sin than never having reclaimed this land would be letting land that is Jewish fall back into Arab hands. Up here, we fight no less of a battle than the one that took my husband. Now tell me, young soldier,’ Rena said, ‘how do we fare in this war?’

There was no mirror in the shack for Rena to cover. The collar of her shirt was already torn. There was hardly a way to harshen her life as an appropriate sign of mourning, and so she sat on the crate that held their books, and she grieved. She spent the next two days perched in the door of their shack, waiting for any traveller who might pass and acknowledge her loss.

On the third day of mourning, Rena was comforted to see her three sons crest the hill. They came carrying supplies on their backs, and with a group of boys in tow.

The sons wept with their mother and then moved aside, so that each of the new boys could approach and welcome Rena into the mourners of Zion.

It was her oldest son, Yermiyahu, who explained things. ‘These are boys from our yeshiva. They’ve come to help us make a minyan, so that we can say Kaddish for our father at home.’

And it was her second son, Matityahu, who said, baby-faced and trying to appear stoic, ‘They have taken an oath in honour of our father and his memory.’

And the tallest of those boys, momentarily emboldened by the report of his pledge, said, ‘We make this our home, too. And we will not so much as step off this hill until there are ten for each one of us. Until our seven are seventy.’

Her littlest, Tzuki, just past bar mitzvah, came up and hugged her. ‘Look, Mother, at how our settlement grows.’

‘Yes, my boy,’ Rena said, slipping into that space where every house of mourning for a moment turns happy. ‘And only weeks ago,’ she said, tickling at the down of his upper lip, ‘did we go from having three men to four.’ All laughed, and then all turned serious as the sons took seats around their mother on the floor. The seven who were not grieving went right to clearing rocks, pulling weeds and planting their tents on the hill.

11: 1987

It was this day that was talked about for years to come. How sister hills became a city. And so moved were the people who heard the story, they forgot even to ask whatever had happened to the baby girl, and where Hanan was buried, and whether Rena had remarried, and if the

Arab boy had ever come back about that tree. They were simply taken with the legend of this sacrifice and the *halutz*-like pioneering commitment of this woman, as well as that of the seven boys who followed her sons back to settle.

The aura of this tale was strengthened by the facts on the ground. One would find it hard to believe that in barely fourteen years, exactly half the life of her youngest, the settlement had grown to such a degree.

There were paved roads, and two schools, and a *kolel*, and a synagogue. And thanks to a Texas evangelist who had fallen in love with that place (before a greater love undid him), their settlement had been gifted with a sports centre, complete with the only ice-skating rink in the West Bank as a whole.

It was a city perfectly melded with the contours of the land, circle after circle of houses running down the sides of those hills, and echoing the foregone terraces. There was a perfect symmetry of red roofs and white walls reaching down to the valley floor and edging so close to that Arab village on the eastern side, they'd been forced to take over the village's fields as a security buffer. This gleaming new city was made all the more beautiful by the contrast of those two green hilltops, one with an olive grove and the other bare. The two hilltops belonging to those two founding families looked nearly exactly as they had when those first families returned. All the cement and paved road,

all the streetlamps and cobblestones, all the public benches and mailboxes and skinny evergreen trees, all of that came to a stop where the roads wound up to the tops of those hills and came to an end. It was – and the most pious among them couldn't help but say it – like two green teats topping those mountains.

But for the additions of running water and electricity, Rena's shack stayed the same. The only discernible differences to her plot of land were the two-storey pole on the southern end, on which sat the siren for announcing war, and, on the northern tip, the stone obelisk that rose from the top of that giant boulder, as if it had somehow forced its way up from within. It was the town's *andarta*. On it were engraved the names of the men of the village who had died at war.

Hanan was the first casualty of those sister hills, and how they'd all wished he'd remained the only name. By the time the intifada was tearing up the West Bank, the list on that stone was too long for a place so young. There was Rena's oldest son, Yermiyahu, killed in Tripoli in '83, as well as two of those pioneering seven boys who'd followed him home, only to die at his side in battle. And, just days before, on the back of a family already saddled with so much tragedy, Rena had lost her second son, her baby-faced Matityahu, now a grown man. He was nearing thirty, and finally engaged to be married that spring. Of course, Matityahu's name had yet to be added to the other eight on that list.

There had been rock-throwing in the Arab village below, and with a few green soldiers stuck in the wadi beyond and overwhelmed by this kind of close-quarters battle, the men of their town had run down into the fight. And somehow in this melee, Rena had lost a son. Her Mati, her warrior. It wasn't even real warfare, only tear gas and rocks and rubber bullets. Rena still couldn't believe it. A mighty son lost to boys throwing stones.

She was still sitting shiva. And in contrast to when she'd lost her husband and sat three days alone in her doorway like Abraham himself, it was the populace of a small city that now passed through her home. The town had stayed close enough to its roots to revere its founder with something like faith.

The visitor who'd travelled farthest to see her was her youngest, Tzuki, her last living son – though he was already his own kind of casualty to Rena. Tzuki had driven from Haifa, where he lived as a liberal, a secularist, and a gay. He shared an apartment with another boy he'd met at yeshiva. And Tzuki told his mother, with a flash in his eye, that from their balcony they looked upon the water.

To look at her son, as much a founder of their settlement as she was, Rena could not believe how people transform in the span of one life. There he sat, receiving the town with a yarmulke perched on his head, like it was the first he'd ever worn. Where tzitzit would go, a black T-shirt showed through his button-down shirt. And on his arm, exposed for all the world to see, was a tattoo of a dolphin – like the ones that mark the trash who sit and drink beer on the beach in Tel Aviv.

When he'd told her of his lifestyle, she'd sworn never to meet the boy he called his partner. And Tzuki had said that wouldn't be a problem, as he'd sworn never again to cross the Green Line from Israel proper into the territories it held. When his last brother died, she did not think he'd come to see her. And yet, here he was at her side. For this, she put a hand to his hand, and from there they wove fingers. To her son, she said, 'It's nice of you to do this for Mati.'

'For my brother and for you,' he said. Then he stood and joined the men in the grove who'd gathered together to hear him recite the prayer for the dead.



How things change, you wouldn't believe. Another thirteen years pass and those sister hills now cap a metropolis. With the aid of a small bridge of new land, the settlement had merged with a younger community to the west and now looked, on the army maps, like a barbell. And this was exactly the nickname the battalions of Israeli soldiers sent to defend it now used. Along with the new territory came a small religious college that gave out, in handfuls, endless degrees in law. There was a mall with a food court, and a multiplex within it that showed all the American films. There was a boutique hotel and a historical museum and a clinic that could do anything short of transplanting a heart. And along both edges of the connecting roadway between old and new city, there were *dunam* after *dunam* of hydroponic tomatoes set in greenhouses. An operation watered by robot, tended by Thai worker, and whose plants somehow grew with their roots at the top and fat fruit hanging down.

A core group of idealists still remained in that expansive settlement. There were the families of those first seven boys, and the seventy that followed. There were Rav Kook stalwarts, and old-school Messianists, and religious Zionists of every stripe. But this didn't stop the colony's transformation into the bedroom community it had become. Behind the bougainvillea-covered balconies lived professors who drove to Be'er Sheva to teach at the big university, and start-up types who commuted every day to the technical park in Jerusalem, as well as venture capitalists who used Ben Gurion Airport as if it were the Central Bus Station, flying to Europe for a lunch and making it back late the same night. And there was a subset among those new neighbours that the founding residents, the farmers and fighters, could hardly understand: the healthy grown men, pale and soft in the middle, who lived on Japanese and Indian and American clocks, making trades or writing code, supporting large families without ever stepping out into the light.

They came for the tax breaks. They came for the space. They came for the vistas and the fresh air, and because the tomatoes – growing backward, and also without ever seeing sun – still tasted bet-

ter than anything they'd had in their fancy Orna & Ella salads back on Sheinkin Street.

Though Aheret was a pious girl who wore a skirt to the floor and a shirt that reached to her wrists, she had a worldly allure that belied the choices she'd made. She'd studied at the girls' school on the hill, and done her national service helping the elderly of their town. When the eldest of her younger sisters went off to board in Jerusalem, and when her father was sent by the settler movement to travel across the United States for long stretches to do outreach (his calling) and send home money (a necessity), she'd stayed in the house to help her mother with the littlest of her eight siblings and run their home, a strange maze of additions and tacked-on rooms that, on the holidays, when all were together, still burst at the seams. These humble choices found Aheret unmarried at twenty-seven, which, in their community, left her seen as an old maid.

When Aheret stepped into the house with a laundry basket full of clean clothes still stiff from the lines, she saw someone darting around in the back rooms of the house. She at first assumed they were being robbed, until her eyes adjusted to the inside and she made out a silhouette that fitted every older woman of their town. '*Gveret!*' she called, not wholly impolitely. 'Missus, can I help you? What are you doing in our house?' At that, the woman's ears perked up, and all her nervous energy flooded out towards Aheret, with the woman, riding it like a wave, right behind.

'Your mother,' the woman called. 'Where's your mother?' she said.

'Hanging what's wet,' Aheret said, and pointed through the wall to the lines.

'Come, come,' the woman said, grabbing Aheret's arm, sometimes leading, sometimes following, as they both rushed around the house.

With a clothespin in her mouth and a wet sock in her hand, Yehudit looked at the pair hurrying towards her and tilted her head to the side.

'Is this the one I bought?' Rena yelled, pulling Aheret. 'Is this the one that's mine?'

And Aheret, who had never been told the story of her near death, was more

surprised by her mother's answer than by the question of the lady who pulled her. For Yehudit dropped the sock into the basket and pulled the clothespin from her lips and said, 'Yes, yes. This is the one that's yours.'

Despite the fact that the hilltops were forever facing, the difference between the two families' lives and the two families' fates had put far more distance than the geography in between. To anyone who still knew she was up there, Rena was simply the old woman in the olive grove, while Yehudit, with her brood, took advantage of the settlement's great blooming and lived a vibrant life.

Yehudit had not forgotten her sister founder, who, despite her great sacrifice, had been dealt a harsh life. She'd gone over every few months to check on Rena, and Yehudit always acted surprised to discover that she carried with her a cake or a cooked chicken in the bag in her hand. As loyal as she was to Rena, she could tell that all her troubles had turned the woman hard. And though Yehudit took her children to visit other lonely souls, it had been a very long time since she'd taken any of them up to visit Rena in the grove. Because of this, Rena hadn't set eyes on Yehudit's daughter in years, and the same went for Aheret in relation to the woman she knew from her mother as Mrs Barak.

Rena had let go of Aheret's arm to pull a little Nokia phone from the pocket of her skirt. It was a phone no different from the other million phones the supermarkets had given away when the cell towers went up. She held this out to Yehudit and her daughter, as if looking at it alone would let them read the calls inside.

'Tzuki,' she said. 'My last boy has been killed.'

Yehudit and Aheret, like every citizen of that country, were up to date on the national news of the day. There'd been nothing in Lebanon or Gaza, no terrorist attack listed on the radio at the top of the hour. It was a quiet September morning.

But it wasn't any outside force, not politics, or religion, that did Tzuki in. It was Israel's own internal plague that had taken him, the one that took more children of Israel than all the bloodshed and hatred of all their long wars combined. 'Hit,' Rena said. 'The coastal highway. Run off the road by a boy driving one

hundred and eighty kilometres an hour.’

‘*Baruch dayan emet,*’ Aheret said. And then: ‘Mercy upon you, a terrible loss.’

‘Sit, sit,’ Yehudit said, overturning the basket of clean laundry and helping Rena to sit down. ‘Another tragedy,’ she said. ‘How many can fall on one home?’ As she said this, she stepped over to the eaves and began tearing wildly at a little mint plant, one among many at the side of the house. She held these leaves out to Aheret, letting them fall in wet clumps into her daughter’s hands. ‘Go,’ she said, ‘make Rena a hot cup of tea.’

Before Aheret ran off, Rena had ahold of her skirt. ‘No need for tea,’ she said to Yehudit. ‘We’re not staying long.’

And here, Aheret, who did not know the story of her childhood sickness, who did not know of the deal that had been struck, reflected on this statement along with the exchange she’d heard earlier.

Growing up, Aheret would lie with her head in her mother’s lap and beg her to run her fingers through her hair, and to tell the stories that came before remembering. The one Yehudit always told with great pride was that once upon a time, there were in this place two empty mountains that God had long ago given Israel but that Israel had long forgotten. And one day, two brave families had come to settle those mountains. The first had three young boys, and the other came up that hill alone and bore a baby girl who was, for the future of their settlement, as great a gift as Adam’s finding Eve.

Aheret now stared at her mother, and knew from her face that there was another story she’d not been told.

‘Look this way,’ Rena said, pulling at that skirt, drawing Aheret’s eyes to her. ‘Look to me, at *this* face. Here is where your questions now go.’

Rena then pulled hard at the skirt, not to draw Aheret down, but to pull herself

up. Standing, staring at Aheret, she said, ‘Come along.’

‘Please,’ Yehudit said. ‘You can’t really want it this way? Today – despite your sadness – is not really any different. Tzuki, before this accident, was already, to you, long gone.’

‘A child distant,’ Rena said, ‘a child rebellious, a child cut off in head and heart, it is not the same as no child at all. You have always been a smart woman,’ Rena said. ‘And what takes place here is not remotely equal. But in a moment,

And to Aheret, she said, ‘Daughter, come along.’

The woman had just buried her last son. The woman gone mad. And Yehudit, who had been through it all with her, who had built this giant city at her side, thought it would not hurt to send her daughter to walk the woman back, to help her into her mourning, to stay and offer comfort and maybe cook for her a meal. Think about it. A husband killed at the start of her new life. Two sons cut

down as heroes and a third, already lost to her, run off the side of the road. And here was Yehudit, blessed with nine, all healthy and happy, and with a husband she loved who was often far from her side but who sent back Jew after Jew in his stead. Benevolent, Yehudit sent Aheret with her. And Aheret, only half filled in on the story and half comprehending, was a dutiful daughter and understood the strange favours that sometimes fell to a neighbour when someone was in pain.

As the pair started to walk down the hill, Aheret turned back towards her mother, hoping for a signal, trying to communicate while maintaining respect under this watchful woman’s eye. And Rena said, ‘I can see the question you are trying to ask, daughter. The answer is simple. You were sold to me as a child. And, for all intents and purposes, you



you’ll have the first tiny inkling of how I three times over feel.’

‘It was a joke,’ Yehudit said, panicked and referring back to their deal. ‘The whole thing a silly superstition. You said yourself – almost thirty years ago, and I remember like yesterday – you said it was just old-country mumbo jumbo, a worried mother’s game.’

‘A deal is a deal,’ Rena said to Yehudit.

are mine.’

‘Mother!’ Aheret called to Yehudit, unable to contain herself.

But it was Rena, again holding her skirt, who gave the girl a yank and said, ‘What?’

‘It is the madness of grief,’ the rabbi said as Yehudit trailed after him in the supermarket. She’d tracked him down, first by

calling the shul, and then the *kolel*, and then the school, where his secretary said he'd run out to the supermarket for supplies. That's where Yehudit found him, pushing a cart tumbled full with cartons of ice cream, a treat to the students for some charitable act. He'd said, 'We do the right thing because it is right – that doesn't mean a child can't be rewarded just the same.' As for the story he was hearing, he said, 'When the shiva is over, I can promise you, *bli neder*, that Mrs Barak won't want to treat such a trivial pledge as a binding contract at all.'

Yehudit stood there in the freezer aisle and looked as if she was going to weep. The rabbi nodded in the way thoughtful rabbis do. He was a tall man, and slim, and even into his later years his beard had stayed black. He looked twenty years younger than he was, and so when he smiled at her kindly, there was a separate sort of calm that Yehudit felt, a husbandly calm, which was very fulfilling in the moment, with her own husband so far away.

'I know you don't want to say it,' the rabbi said, 'but it is not *lashon hara* to point out between us that you're afraid Rena's heart has hardened over all these lonely years.'

'That is what I fear,' Yehudit said.

'Then let me pose for you a scenario of a different sort. Even if she takes you to rabbinical court, and you face the *beit din* over this case, can you imagine such a thing holding up?' When she did not answer, he said it again. 'Well, can you imagine me taking her side?'

'No,' Yehudit said.

'So let us remember that without that woman, as much as without you, the great miracle that is our lives in this place would not be. And even if she'd contributed nothing to its founding, even if – God forbid – she had only taken, and done harm, still, can we not pity her in this time of grief? Especially a woman who has known sadness so much more than joy?'

'Yes,' Yehudit said. Though the question was not wiped from her face.

'Go on,' he said, 'what is it?'

'Can you tell me, Rebbe – and I understand the word – but what, with my daughter taken, does *pity* mean?'

'It means would it hurt Aheret to stay by this woman's side through to the end

of the period of mourning?'

Yehudit went to answer, and the rabbi raised a silencing hand. 'After their ice cream, I will send up the boys to pray. I will send up some girls to help. Your daughter will not be left alone. And if harbouring such a fantasy allows Rena to survive this week, how bad is it to indulge for a little while?'

'And what if she doesn't give it up?'

'Then you will convene a rabbinical court, over which I myself will preside. And I promise you, even if it's an hour before Shabbat that you come to me, I will find another two *rabbanim*, and we'll settle the matter right then. But I will not bring one of the two mothers of this community, who has just lost her last son, to stand in judgement today.'

'All right,' Yehudit said. 'If Aheret is willing, I will let her stay until Rena rises from mourning.'

The period of shiva was not like it was for Mati, and not like it was for Yermiyahu. It better resembled how it had been when she'd lost her husband, Hanan. The new people of the city did not know Rena. And the staunch Mizrahi religious had forgotten her son when she herself had cut him off. Many others in town, though they did not say it, felt the boy had been punished for his evil ways, and they worried that, in visiting his mother, such a thought might show up in their eyes. So they made themselves busy with other things, and they told themselves they would visit on another day, until all the days were done.

Once again, the minyan at Rena's shack was comprised of volunteer boys sent from a yeshiva down the hill. The main difference was that the girls were sent along with them to try to cheer her, and, of course, there was Aheret, taking care.

When Rena addressed Aheret, she'd say, 'Daughter, some tea,' or 'Daughter, a biscuit.' And those bright student girls who sat with Rena could not understand why this woman grieved for her son but her daughter did not cry over her brother. To them, Rena would say, 'A very long story, how I alone sit shiva and the sister does not mourn.'

For Aheret, sleeping on a cot in that one-room shack, her only peace was on her nightly walk to the outdoor bathroom. Plumbed though it was, it was

separate from the house. On her way, Aheret would sneak over to the boulder on which the memorial obelisk stood. She would read the names of the town's fallen by flashlight and understand that her sacrifice was small.

Yehudit came every day to pay her respects, and to see that the girl who had been her daughter was well. She took it upon herself to bake a simple cake for the final service of the shiva, so that she would be there when the bereaved stood up from mourning and first exited the house.

Poised in the sun with Aheret at her side, Yehudit watched in silence as Rena circled the top of the hill, enacting the traditional walk that marked the week's close. When Rena arrived at the door once again, Yehudit wished her a long and healthy life, then took Aheret's hand and said, 'Come, my child, let's go.'

Rena tilted her head, quizzical, just as Yehudit had when Rena came around the house, dragging Aheret her way. 'Where do you take my daughter?' Rena said. 'The end of the week does not end the bond.'

Yehudit had planned for this moment, rehearsing it ceaselessly in her head. She pulled from her pocket the original bill with which Rena had paid her. She'd saved it as a keepsake all these years.

Rena laughed. '*Livot?*' she said. 'Not even valid currency any more.'

'Then I'll pay in shekels, or dollars. You name your price.'

'A price on a girl like this?' Rena said. 'What kind of mother would sell her daughter?'

'You know why I did it,' Yehudit said. 'To save her.'

'I also know when you did it. And I know what has changed.' Rena signalled all that was around them. 'What did we pay for these hills so many years before? Now think of what it would cost to buy the city that sits atop them. Understand, Yehudit – I'm alone in the world but for my daughter. For all the riches this world contains, I wouldn't sell her away. She is my peace, and my comfort' – and here Rena stepped over and put a delicate touch on Aheret's cheek, 'my life.'

Then Rena's touch changed, and she circled that hand around Aheret's wrist, holding tight.

'Mother,' Aheret called, now truly

frightened.

And again, it was Rena who answered the call.

Three rabbis sat under the shade of the giant olive tree. They were perched on moulded plastic chairs, a plastic table before them. Rena had defied their order to appear in their court, on the grounds that a case so obvious was no case at all. And when Rabbi Kiggel (the man with the ice cream) offered to bring the panel of judges to her, Rena said only, 'My door has been open to all comers since before there was anyone to come.'

And so the rabbis drove up to where the road ends, the plastic furniture tied to the roof of their Subaru, and they took their places under the tree that would offer the most shade. Since none of the rabbis knew to look, they did not notice the scar at the tree's base, grown over in keloid fashion, and healed up in the interim twenty-seven years.

Across from the rabbis stood Aheret and her mother, Yehudit. And in a chair carried from the house, Aheret's other mother, Rena, sat facing the rabbis, waiting for her turn to speak. Yehudit spoke passionately and with great urgency, and Rena did not listen. She just stared at the two rabbis flanking Kiggel's side. If Kiggel was ten years older than Rena, then the one to his right was another ten years older than that. As for the child rabbi to his left, Rena didn't believe he'd yet been bar-mitzvahed. Before he'd been allowed to sit in judgment of her, she'd

have preferred if they'd pulled down his pants to make sure that, at the very least, he had his three hairs.

When Yehudit was done, she again presented the single bill with which Rena had purchased her daughter. This, the rabbis placed on their table, under the weight of a stone.

'A boy' is what Rena said, pointing at the young rabbi. 'A child who has never known a world with a divided Jerusalem. Who was raised in a greater Israel, where he can pray at the foot of our Holy Temple in a united city, where he can cross the Jordan without fear and stare down at his country from atop the Golan Heights. And here he sits in judgment on my land, in the heart of Samaria, because of the sacrifices made before he was born.'

Kiggel went to speak, but it was the young rabbi who put a hand to his arm to answer on his own.

'This I acknowledge,' the boy rabbi said. 'But in this life, I've already achieved – and this court would appreciate the respect it is due.'

'And what respect is that?' Rena said.

'The respect that comes with law. You have sacrificed,' he said. 'You have fought. And I continue the fight my own way. Look at us. We live in a Jewish country, with a Jewish government, and yet its false, secular courts send Jewish soldiers to knock down the houses we build. They arrest our brothers as vigilantes, who only protect what God has given. And those same judges, in those same courts, give Arabs the rights of Jews – as if a

passport is all it takes to make a person a citizen of this land. You fought your battles, and now we fight ours. I am thankful there are avenues in this country where one may be judged by Jewish law, as the Holy One –blessed is He – intended.'

'You will judge me as God intended?'

'We will judge based on the law that is within the grasp of humble man.'

'That is all I wanted to hear.' And Rena stood up from her chair. She approached the three rabbis. She looked to Yehudit and to Aheret, her daughter.

'It is not far from here,' Rena said, 'where Esav returned from the hunt, tired and hungry, and traded away his birth-right for a bowl of red lentils. It is among these very hills where Abraham, our father, took a heifer, three years old, and a goat, three years old, and a ram, three years old, and a turtledove, three years old, and a young pigeon and split them all, but for those birds, and left them for the vultures in a covenant with God, which gives us the right to this land as a whole. And for four hundred shekels of silver, Abraham bought the cave in which he lies buried – and over which, with our Arab neighbours, we spill blood until this very day. So tell me, these contracts, with God and man, written down nowhere, only remembered, do they still hold?'

And the rabbis looked at one another, and the ancient rabbi on the right, the white of the beard around his mouth stained brown, said, 'Do not turn this day into one of blasphemy. Do not dare compare our modern trivialities to what was done in biblical times.'

'I ask only does the verbal contract with which God granted us this nation stand, or does it not? With respect, with honour, I ask.'

'We do not need a paper when the contracts are with God. And the ones you list that are between man and man – those, too, are recorded in the Torah, which is also, every word



and every letter, whispered by God into Moses' ear. The answer is, they are valid, and unquestionable, and, also, do not compare.'

It was Kiggel who then spoke. 'I ask you, Gveret Barak. I know you do not intend blasphemy, I know this matter is charged. But let us use perspective. Let us keep things in their right size.'

It was Yehudit who screamed at this, 'My daughter, my daughter's life – do not treat it as small.'

'My daughter,' Rena said, correcting her. 'My daughter, as much as this is my city, as much as this court convenes at my home. If you want to reject our ancient covenants as irrelevant, then let us talk about modern times. From the very first day Yehudit and her husband bought their hill, and my husband and I purchased the one on which you sit, the Arabs in the village right there below have claimed it a false contract, a purchase made from a relative who had no right to sell.'

'This is the Arab way,' Rabbi Kiggel said.

'Well, is our city built on a lie? It is not three thousand years old, but thirty. If they claim their contract false – a contract entered into the same year as the one now in dispute – do we give up our homes? Do we give up our city? For they, too – like the bill that flutters on your table – are willing to pay back the amount they received.'

'A Jewish court,' the young rabbi said. 'It is not the same what happens between the Jew and the Gentile. And it is not the same what happens between peoples at war.'

Rena looked to Yehudit and Aheret and then to the rabbis before her.

'I see,' she said. 'This is a false court. You try to trick an old woman in mourning, a lonely woman. Judgment has already been passed, hasn't it? There is no way I can win.'

'No,' Kiggel said, 'you will be awarded motherhood, if you are right.'

'Promise it,' Rena said. And pointing to Yehudit and Aheret, she said, 'Make them both promise that they will follow what this *beit din* decides. I will not have this settled by emotion. If it is a valid court, and an honest court, I will have it settled by what is right.'

'You will,' Kiggel said.

'We will follow the court's ruling,' Yehudit said.

'From her,' Rena said, pointing at the girl. 'From her I want to hear it.'

'I am a founder of this city,' Aheret said, 'the same as you two, only more. I was born to these hills and to these hills I will return. I know no other place. And no other world. If this is what the rabbis decide, if this is the law of the land, then so be it. My life, it's in God's hands. I will follow the ruling of this court.'

'Tomorrow is Rosh Hashanah,' Rena said. And Yehudit blanched at the news. When, in her life, had a holiday been forgotten? Her children would all be home; she'd need to start her cooking. And then she wondered if, at her table, she'd have eight or nine. 'From tomorrow, we move into the Ten Days of Repentance, when God decides who will live and who will die. Let each of you pledge to judge honestly, or be written out of the Book of Life. Then I, too – I promise – will accept whatever it is you say.'

The rabbis conferred among themselves. They were going to judge honestly. They were honest men. But to take an unnecessary pledge set a dangerous precedent. It was not to be done lightly – and not an easy thing on which to agree.

'We'd prefer to avoid that kind of extremism,' Kiggel said to Rena.

'Then you do not have my trust.'

Again they conferred, and finally they consented, and the young rabbi said, 'We will judge honestly, or let us be written out of the Book of Life.'

'Then I need raise only one simple point,' Rena said, 'and the case will be resolved.'

The rabbis nodded, allowing it.

'If you three pious men will grant me that you are kosher, then you will also grant that the girl is mine.'

'One,' Kiggel said, 'does not follow the other.'

'But it does,' she said. 'You're going to side against me because my contract with Yehudit, you will say, is symbolic. Because my contract with Yehudit can't be considered to be a contract at all.'

'I don't want to say one way or the other,' Kiggel said, 'but there are many facts that lead a logical person this way.'

'So, I ask you, once again, are the three of you kosher? Have you knowingly broken the rules of what is fit to eat?'

'We have not knowingly done so,' the young rabbi said.

'Tomorrow is Rosh Hashanah,' Rena said. 'Do the three of you observe the Jewish holidays? Are you faithful in carrying out Jewish law?'

Once again the young rabbi answered, saying, 'It is safe to assume.'

'Then tell me,' Rena said, 'if you are willing to state that my deed on this land is sound, and ignore the Arab claims against it, if you are willing to accept biblical contracts as eternally valid, though we have no proof beyond faith that they ever were, I ask you, very simply, every year, on Passover, when you sell your *hametz* to a Gentile so as not to break the edict of having any trace of it under your roof, when everyone in your congregations comes to you and says, "Rabbi, for this week when it's prohibited for a Jew to have even one crumb of bread in his house, sell all that is forbidden to a Gentile so that we may inhabit our homes," is that contract real?'

'This is the tradition,' the young rabbi said. 'And that contract is as legal as any other.'

'And in all your years, have you ever heard of a single Gentile anywhere in the world stepping into a Jewish home to open a cabinet and take what is rightfully his? Is there known to you such a case?'

The rabbis looked at one another, and their answer was no.

'So tell me, if the selling of the *hametz* is based on a contract that's never once been exercised in all the years of your lives in all the world over, can you still say that it is a valid contract in your eyes? Or do you admit that, really, each one of us – each one of you! – is in possession of *hametz* every Passover, and that no Jew really observes the holiday as commanded?'

'God forbid!' the rabbis said, all three.

Then the old rabbi said, 'You find yourself on the edge of blasphemy once again. But if there is a point to be made, then, yes, that contract is valid, exercised or no.'

'If that contract is valid, if you three can still call yourselves kosher, then you have to admit, equally valid is mine. Just because it's assumed that one party will never exercise her rights doesn't mean the rights are not hers.'

And here the rabbis whispered, and all

three took out their pens and began passing one another notes, looking terribly concerned. For a judge can know how his heart would decide, but his obligation is always to the law. And they had sworn, these three. Sworn on their lives. A terrible promise to make.

‘And tell me this,’ Rena said. ‘When a little bar mitzvah boy says to a pretty girl as a joke, “You are my wife,” and he gives her a bracelet as a token –’

‘A divorce is arranged,’ the young rabbi said. ‘We have done it before. Yes, if it is uttered and the gift received, they are married, the same as any two people in the world.’

‘Even if neither really meant it?’ Rena said. ‘Even if an innocent joke between two young adults at play?’

‘Even then,’ said Rabbi Kiggel.

‘That is all I’m saying,’ Rena said. ‘That a contract doesn’t require either party to intend to exercise its terms, or even for both parties to be mature enough to grasp them. And likewise a symbolic contract, like that of Passover, whose intent at signing is that it would never be put into use,

is as valid as any other in the eyes of God. So all you’re really deciding in this case is if the money on the table before you was of any value at the time the deal was made. That is all the court is being asked. If you are religious men, following religious law, then there is nothing to say but that the girl belongs to me.’

‘The same as a slave, though,’ Kiggel said, a finger raised. ‘That’s how it would be.’

‘Call it what you will, but the girl is mine.’

Aheret stood in the dark on the western edge of the hill. Rosh Hashanah dinner had finished. And she’d come out to the edge of the grove to stare across to the hill opposite, where she could see that

her mother had left a light burning in the window so Aheret would know that she was not forgotten.

It was the second night since the verdict, and so different from those first days when she’d tended to this woman during her week of mourning. Aheret was hopeless, and – since suicide was forbidden, a grave sin – she could only wish and pray that the world, for her, would come to an end. Let me be left out of the Book of Life, she thought. Let my fate be decided this week. Let the sky up above come crashing down.

And it was, right then, as if Aheret’s prayers were answered.

Though it was not the sky that was falling, but the earth shaking as if it planned to swallow up the whole hill. There was nothing to see from the side of the summit on which Aheret stood. No dust rose



up in the distance, as when Hanan had caught the armoured corps rolling down towards the Yom Kippur War.

It was from the other side of the little shack that the sound of great conflagration came, and anyone who hadn’t been raised on those hills might have thought they were already surrounded. It took a lifetime to learn how the specific echoes bounced off the range.

Aheret hadn’t wanted to stand on that side of the house ever again. That’s where her fate had been sealed. Where her two mothers had stood silent before the rabbis, as stiff as the trees around them, as abiding as the sister hills themselves.

What she saw when she rounded the house and passed the big tree and stood at the edge was a battle being raged inside

Israel like none she had ever seen. The village below was practically afire, not with the force of Israeli aggression, but with the unleashing of a new kind of Palestinian rage. The bypass roads that had sprung up throughout her lifetime were blocked, tyres burning at every edge. There was the sound of light arms, at first intermittent and then turning frequent as more Arabs than she ever knew existed streamed out to fight the Israeli soldiers who’d already arrived. In the sky, coming from Jerusalem, she could see the lights of the Black Hawks and Cobras as the helicopters raced their way. And then she saw nothing as the helicopters went dark so as to enter the fight in stealth. Of all the ends to this country she’d imagined, this was not one foreseen. She did not think, since the time of its founding, that it had ever known such violence to rise up within its borders.

That is when she noticed Rena at her side, handing her an Uzi to match her own.

‘Do you think,’ Aheret said, ‘the whole country is like this?’

‘It’s another intifada,’ Rena said. ‘Look,’ she added, pointing to a vehicle of the Palestinian Authority. ‘Which naive Jew thought it was safe to give

them guns? And on a holy day again they attack.’ Rena turned towards the tree and looked down at the battle truly raging below. She said, ‘Tonight it comes down. We can never let ourselves be sneaked up on again.’

Rena rushed back to the shack. And, wearing her festival dress, she returned with an axe in hand.

‘It is *yom tov* tonight,’ Aheret said. ‘Forbidden.’

‘In an emergency such measures are allowed.’ She handed the axe to her daughter, who did not take it from her.

‘I won’t,’ Aheret said. ‘The soldiers fight. The Arabs do not yet come up the hill. And still, if the war shifts this way, seeing it overtake us from the window won’t help us to survive.’

'Insolent daughter,' Rena said. 'I'll do it myself.' And Rena pulled up her sleeves, and she hacked and hacked at that tree. Rena chopped for hours, and no one heard a single blow echo off the mountains, drowned out as they were by the fight.

This time, Rena did not stop because she was tired. She did not stop because her arms were weak. She would not let age get in her way, or the pains of her body, or the shortness of breath. She did not even heed Aheret's calls from the shack when the girl told her it was too much and to quit for the night. Rena did not stop until that tree was felled. And it was the sound of it hitting that sent Aheret back outside in the morning light.

What the girl found was the tree fallen over, and Rena fallen at its side. Her mother held the axe in one hand, and

the other reached across her chest, grabbing at that axe-holding arm. Rena's face had gone slack, a racking pain clearly troubling one side. And Aheret could see on this woman – who'd aged a hundred years in a night, and breathed in the most laboured fashion – a terror in her eyes.

Aheret took mercy. She leaned down to count out Rena's pulse. She had, as said, done her national service with the aged on those two hills, and was well versed in the maladies that struck its residents with time.

'Am I dying?' Rena said.

Aheret thought about this. And the honest answer – she would bet on it – was the one she gave: 'No. No, you are not.'

'Call the ambulance,' Rena said.

'Yes,' Aheret said, but it was not the Yes of affirmation, but of considered thought. Aheret was consumed with the question

of Rena's current state and how it compared with her own. 'I will call, Mother, absolutely. But the issue at hand is, when? It is – you are right – permissible to pick up a phone on a holy day if it is a life-and-death situation. But the fact that you are still with us may mean the danger has already passed.'

'I think,' Rena said, 'a heart attack.'

And Aheret said, 'I think you are right. But if it was big enough to be fatal, I'm fairly sure you'd already be dead. What is at stake now, my guess, from my limited knowledge, is the extent of the recovery you may expect. That is where speed is of the essence.'

'What do you say, daughter?' Rena said, looking panicked and confused in the dirt.

'I'd imagine, if we get you help in a hurry, you'll be fine altogether once again. You will be your old self. This is not a



question of life and death; what it is, is a question of life and quality of life. If I leave you here by your tree until the end of the holiday, if I wait until it's permissible to use a phone, I can't say that things will turn out well at all. If you think you are weak now, Mother, if you think you are in pain, then understand, just lifting a glass to your mouth for a sip of water will feel like carrying this mountain on your back. I have seen the old people with damaged hearts and soggy lungs. It is not a life to be lived.'

'A commandment,' Rena said. 'To honour your parents. You must.'

'Not when your parent tells you to break a holy law.'

'Permissible! No matter what.' And again Rena puffed out a feeble 'Life and death.'

'But you are still living, with all these minutes ticked by. No, I really don't see it as such. We will ask those three wise rabbis to convene after the holiday and decide, and they will tell us if, by law, I did what's right.'

'Cursed girl,' Rena said.

'What you mean is "cursed daughter". Not long under this roof and already I learn from you how to get my way. Never in that other house would such a thought have been born. Now listen close, it's very simple: if you free me, I will call right now. I will see you to the hospital and I will – on my word – tend to you until you are back up on your feet. I will do it, not as your daughter, but as a daughter of Israel and of this settlement. I will treat you as I would have before you ever cashed in your bond. Free me, and I call. Free me, and there is a great chance you will be able to walk again, and live again, and return to a normal life. Free me, and you'll be able to dress yourself, and walk yourself, and enjoy what years you have left. Don't you want that? A trade? Your freedom for mine.'

'Don't need it,' she said, breathing out short and heavy. 'Don't need to take care, don't need to walk.'

'How can you say that?' Aheret yelled. 'Because I have you to take care.'

IV : 2011

Dmitry and Lisa stand on the edge of the hill and stare at an endless stretch

of security wall. 'Most of it's just fence in these parts' is what their real estate agent says, 'but here, because the village is so close and because the fighting back at the start was so fierce, they've got a good rebar concrete wall running the whole way. You can't do any better when it comes to security than that. And no need even to think about it. Really, put it out of your mind. This stretch has been quiet for going on ten years. Still, no one should be unwary in these parts. God forbid something were ever to start up – look, no direct line of fire, no sniper trouble, no hiding under your bed. Intifada Three starts, and I promise you, it won't make a peep in your life.'

'And Internet,' Dmitry says. 'Out here in the boondocks, is the building wired for high speed?'

'Every unit,' the agent says, 'and over there,' he says, pointing to the obelisk on the giant boulder at the edge of the hill, 'hidden behind it are signal boosters, so even if you don't get your own router, the whole town, free Wi-Fi, and the best cell-phone service between here and Dubai. Do you want to see upstairs?'

'Let's see upstairs,' Lisa says, and then apologizes for her accent. 'You'd never believe,' she says, 'that the two of us fell in love in the same *ulpan* class – his Hebrew so much better than mine.'

'The Russians learn quick,' the real estate agent says, smiling at Dmitry. And Dmitry smiles a strained smile in return.

On the way into the apartment building, Lisa looks back at the wall. 'I mean, are they okay?' she says. 'Do they treat the Palestinians all right on the other side of the wall? We are kind of left-wing, you know. I mean, for the space, we'll live here, for the extra bedrooms, but, you know, we feel bad for the Arabs, with all the roadblocks and things like that.'

Now Dmitry smiles a real smile. 'She doesn't want to live among radicals,' he says. 'She's from Cherry Hill, in America. They worry about equal everything over there.'

'"Radicals"?' the real estate agent says, completely surprised by the notion. 'No, always this place, since the seventies, this town has gotten along with its neighbours. Always friendly relations, and attending one another's weddings. It was all very close over here until the First

Intifada broke out. Until then, where one place ended and the other started, who knew?'

'Because we don't want the politics,' Lisa says. 'I mean the building is beautiful, and the area – it's just stunning. But we're not settlers. And we don't want to be surrounded by that sort.'

Here the real estate agent walks them through what could be their new kitchen, and what could be their new living room, and presses the button that raises the automatic security shade. He leads them out onto what could be their new balcony, all the while continuing to talk.

'If you mean those crazy Levinger-type settlers, then not at all,' he says directly to Lisa, who listens. The words glance off Dmitry, who takes an owner's stance, leaning on the bar of the balustrade and staring out, pretending that it's already his view. 'Are there stubborn people here?' the real estate agent asks. 'Sure! There are plenty of stubborn – like with all good Israelis.' He points to a little shack beneath the balcony, around which the building's carports were built. 'The old woman there,' he says, and Lisa and Dmitry follow his finger, 'she needed the money for selling the land, but she wouldn't, for any amount, let the developer buy her out. There is that kind of steadfastness. And where do you get that from but the real salt of the earth?' As if to demonstrate his point, rolling down a ramp out of the shack's front door comes a wheelchair with an old woman in it, and pushed by a drawn middle-aged woman behind.

'Do you see?' the real estate agent says. 'Sweet as sugar. Those are the kind of people that founded this place. That's who the old-type neighbours will be. A sick elderly mother, and a daughter who gives over her life to care for her. Every time I'm here, I see that pair rolling around, just minding their own business. You two will be happy here,' he says, 'I promise. This is the kind of hill on which to make a life.'

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The Majesty of the Law

by Frank O'Connor

Old Dan Bride was breaking broсна for the fire when he heard a step on the path. He paused, a bundle of saplings on his knee.

Dan had looked after his mother while the life was in her, and after her death no other woman had crossed his threshold. Signs on it, his house had that look. Almost everything in it he had made with his own hands in his own way. The seats of the chairs were only slices of log, rough and round and thick as the saw had left them, and with the rings still plainly visible through the grime and polish that coarse trouser-bottoms had in the course of long years imparted. Into these Dan had rammed stout knotted ashboughs that served alike for legs and back. The deal table, bought in a shop, was an inheritance from his mother and a great pride and joy to him though it rocked whenever he touched it. On the wall, unglazed and fly-spotted, hung in mysterious isolation a Marcus Stone print, and beside the door was a calendar with a picture of a racehorse. Over the door hung a gun, old but good, and in excellent condition, and before the fire was stretched an old setter who raised his head expectantly whenever Dan rose or even stirred.

He raised it now as the steps came nearer and when Dan, laying down the bundle of saplings, cleaned his hands thoughtfully on the seat of his trousers, he gave a loud bark, but this expressed no more than a desire to show off his own watchfulness. He was half human and knew people thought he was old and past his prime.

A man's shadow fell across the oblong of dusty light thrown over the half-door before Dan looked round.

'Are you alone, Dan?' asked an apologetic voice.

'Oh, come in, come in, sergeant, come in and welcome,' exclaimed the old man, hurrying on rather uncertain feet to the door which the tall policeman opened and pushed in. He stood there, half in sunlight, half in shadow, and seeing him so, you would have realized how dark the interior of the house really was. One side of his

red face was turned so as to catch the light, and behind it an ash tree raised its boughs of airy green against the sky. Green fields, broken here and there by clumps of red-brown rock, flowed downhill, and beyond them, stretched all across the horizon, was the sea, flooded and almost transparent with light. The sergeant's face was fat and fresh, the old man's face, emerging from the twilight of the kitchen, had the colour of wind and sun, while the features had been so shaped by the struggle with time and the elements that they might as easily have been found impressed upon the surface of a rock.

'Begor, Dan,' said the sergeant, ' 'tis younger you're getting.'

'Middling I am, sergeant, middling,' agreed the old man in a voice which seemed to accept the remark as a compliment of which politeness would not allow him to take too much advantage. 'No complaints.'

'Begor, 'tis as well because no one would believe them. And the old dog doesn't look a day older.'

The dog gave a low growl as though to show the sergeant that he would remember this unmannerly reference to his age, but indeed he growled every time he was mentioned, under the impression that people had nothing but ill to say of him.

'And how's yourself, sergeant?'

'Well, now, like the most of us, Dan, neither too good nor too bad. We have our own little worries, but, thanks be to God, we have our compensations.'

'And the wife and family?'

'Good, praise be to God, good. They were away from me for a month, the lot of them, at the mother-in-law's place in Clare.'

'In Clare, do you tell me?'

'In Clare. I had a fine quiet time.'

The old man looked about him and then retired to the bedroom, from which he returned a moment later with an old shirt. With this he solemnly wiped the seat and back of the log-chair nearest the fire.

'Sit down now, sergeant. You must be

tired after the journey. 'Tis a long old road. How did you come?'

'Teigue Leary gave me the lift. Wisha now, Dan, don't be putting yourself out. I won't be stopping. I promised them I'd be back inside an hour.'

'What hurry is on you?' asked Dan.

'Look, your foot was only on the path when I made up the fire.'

'Arrah, Dan, you're not making tea for me?'

'I am not making it for you, indeed; I'm making it for myself, and I'll take it very bad of you if you won't have a cup.'

'Dan, Dan, that I mightn't stir, but 'tish't an hour since I had it at the barracks!'

'Ah, whisht, now, whisht! Whisht, will you! I have something here to give you an appetite.'

The old man swung the heavy kettle on to the chain over the open fire, and the dog sat up, shaking his ears with an expression of the deepest interest. The policeman unbuttoned his tunic, opened his belt, took a pipe and a plug of tobacco from his breast pocket, and, crossing his legs in an easy posture, began to cut the tobacco slowly and carefully with his pocket knife. The old man went to the dresser and took down two handsomely decorated cups, the only cups he had, which, though chipped and handleless, were used at all only on very rare occasions; for himself he preferred his tea from a basin. Happening to glance into them, he noticed that they bore signs of disuse and had collected a lot of the fine white turf-dust that always circulated in the little smoky cottage. Again he thought of the shirt, and, rolling up his sleeves with a stately gesture, he wiped them inside and out till they shone. Then he bent and opened the cupboard. Inside was a quart bottle of pale liquid, obviously untouched. He removed the cork and smelt the contents, pausing for a moment in the act as though to recollect where exactly he had noticed that particular smoky smell before. Then, reassured, he stood up and poured out with a liberal hand.

'Try that now, sergeant,' he said with quiet pride.

The sergeant, concealing whatever qualms he might have felt at the idea of drinking illegal whiskey, looked carefully into the cup, sniffed, and glanced

up at old Dan.

'It looks good,' he commented.

'It should be good,' replied Dan with no mock modesty.

'It tastes good too,' said the sergeant.

'Ah, sha,' said Dan, not wishing to praise his own hospitality in his own house, 'tis of no great excellence.'

'You'd be a good judge, I'd say,' said the sergeant without irony.

'Ever since things became what they are,' said Dan, carefully guarding himself against a too-direct reference to the peculiarities of the law administered by his guest, 'liquor isn't what it used to be.'

'I've heard that remark made before now, Dan,' said the sergeant thoughtfully. 'I've heard it said by men of wide experience that it used to be better in the old days.'

'Liquor,' said the old man, 'is a thing that takes time. There was never a good job done in a hurry.'

'Tis an art in itself.'

'Just so.'

'And an art takes time.'

'And knowledge,' added Dan with emphasis. 'Every art has its secrets, and the secrets of distilling are being lost the way the old songs were lost. When I was a boy there wasn't a man in the barony but had a hundred songs in his head, but with people running here, there, and everywhere, the songs were lost. . . . Ever since things became what they are,' he repeated on the same guarded note, 'there's so much running about the secrets are lost.'

'There must have been a power of them.'

'There was. Ask any man today that makes whiskey do he know how to make it out of heather.'

'And was it made of heather?' asked the policeman.

'It was.'

'You never drank it yourself?'

'I didn't, but I knew old men that did, and they told me that no whiskey that's made nowadays could compare with it.'

'Musha, Dan, I think sometimes 'twas a great mistake of the law to set its hand against it.'

Dan shook his head. His eyes answered for him, but it was not in nature for a man to criticize the occupation of a guest in his own home.

'Maybe so, maybe not,' he said noncommittally.

'But sure, what else have the poor people?'

'Them that makes the laws have their own good reasons.'

'All the same, Dan, all the same, 'tis a hard law.'

The sergeant would not be outdone in generosity. Politeness required him not to yield to the old man's defence of his superiors and their mysterious ways.

'It is the secrets I'd be sorry for,' said Dan, summing up. 'Men die and men are born, and where one man drained another will plough, but a secret lost is lost forever.'

'True,' said the sergeant mournfully. 'Lost forever.'

Dan took his cup, rinsed it in a bucket of clear water by the door and cleaned it again with the shirt. Then he placed it carefully at the sergeant's elbow. From the dresser he took a jug of milk and a blue bag containing sugar; this he followed up with a slab of country butter and – a sure sign that he had been expecting a visitor – a round cake of home-made bread, fresh and uncut. The kettle sang and spat and the dog, shaking his ears, barked at it angrily.

'Go away, you brute!' growled Dan, kicking him out of his way.

He made the tea and filled the two cups. The sergeant cut himself a large slice of bread and buttered it thickly.

'It is just like medicines,' said the old man, resuming his theme with the imperturbability of age. 'Every secret there was is lost. And leave no one tell me that a doctor is as good a man as one that had the secrets of old times.'

'How could he be?' asked the sergeant with his mouth full.

'The proof of that was seen when there were doctors and wise people there together.'

'It wasn't to the doctors the people went, I'll engage?'

'It was not. And why?' With a sweeping gesture the old man took in the whole world outside his cabin. 'Out there on the hillsides is the sure cure for every disease. Because it is written' – he tapped the table with his thumb – 'it is written by the poets "wherever you find the disease you will find the cure"'. But people walk up the hills and down the hills and all they see is flowers. Flowers! As if God Almighty – honour and praise to Him! – had nothing better to do with His time than be to making old flowers!'

'Things no doctor could cure the wise people cured,' agreed the sergeant.

'Ah, musha, 'tis I know it,' said Dan bitterly. 'I know it, not in my mind but in my own four bones.'

'Have you the rheumatics at you still?' the sergeant asked in a shocked tone.

'I have. Ah, if you were alive, Kitty O'Hara, or you, Nora Malley of the Glen, 'tishn't I'd be dreading the mountain wind or the sea wind; 'tishn't I'd be creeping down with my misfortunate red ticket for the blue and pink and yellow dribble-drabble of their ignorant dispensary.'

'Why then indeed,' said the sergeant, 'I'll get you a bottle for that.'

'Ah, there's no bottle ever made will cure it.'

'That's where you're wrong, Dan. Don't talk now till you try it. It cured my own uncle when he was that bad he was shouting for the carpenter to cut the two legs off him with a handsaw.'

'I'd give fifty pounds to get rid of it,' said Dan magniloquently. 'I would and five hundred.'

The sergeant finished his tea in a gulp, blessed himself, and struck a match which he then allowed to go out as he answered some question of the old man. He did the same with a second and third, as though titillating his appetite with delay. Finally he succeeded in getting his pipe alight and the two men pulled round their chairs, placed their toes side by side in the ashes, and in deep puffs, lively bursts of conversation, and long, long silences enjoyed their smoke.

'I hope I'm not keeping you?' said the sergeant, as though struck by the length of his visit.

'Ah, what would you keep me from?'

'Tell me if I am. The last thing I'd like to do is waste another man's time.'

'Begor, you wouldn't waste my time if you stopped all night.'

'I like a little chat myself,' confessed the policeman.

And again they became lost in conversation. The light grew thick and coloured and, wheeling about the kitchen before it disappeared, became tinged with gold; the kitchen itself sank into cool greyness with cold light on the cups and basins and plates of the dresser. From the ash tree a thrush began to sing. The open hearth gathered brightness till its light was a warm, even splash of crimson in the twilight.

Twilight was also descending outside when the sergeant rose to go. He fastened his belt and tunic and carefully brushed his clothes. Then he put on his cap, tilted a little to side and back.

'Well, that was a great talk,' he said.

''Tis a pleasure,' said Dan, 'a real pleasure.'

'And I won't forget the bottle for you.'

'Heavy handling from God to you!'

'Good-bye now, Dan.'

'Good-bye, sergeant, and good luck.'

Dan didn't offer to accompany the sergeant beyond the door. He sat in his old place by the fire, took out his pipe once more, blew through it thoughtfully, and just as he leaned forward for a twig to kindle it, heard the steps returning. It was the sergeant. He put his head a little way over the half-door.

'Oh, Dan!' he called softly.

'Ay, sergeant?' replied Dan, looking round, but with one hand still reaching for the twig. He couldn't see the sergeant's face, only hear his voice.

'I suppose you're not thinking of paying that little fine, Dan?'

There was a brief silence.

Dan pulled out the lighted twig, rose slowly, and shambled towards the door, stuffing it down in the almost empty bowl of the pipe. He leaned over the half-door while the sergeant with hands in the pockets of his trousers gazed rather in the direction of the lane-way, yet taking in a considerable portion of the sea line.

'The way it is with me, sergeant,' replied Dan unemotionally, 'I am not.'

'I was thinking that, Dan; I was thinking you wouldn't.'

There was a long silence during which the voice of the thrush grew shriller and merrier. The sunken sun lit up rafts of purple cloud moored high above the wind.

'In a way,' said the sergeant, 'that was what brought me.'

'I was just thinking so, sergeant, it only struck me and you going out the door.'

'If 'twas only the money, Dan, I'm sure there's many would be glad to oblige you.'

'I know that, sergeant. No, 't isn't the money so much as giving that fellow the satisfaction of paying. Because he angered me, sergeant.'

The sergeant made no comment on this and another long silence ensued.

'They gave me the warrant,' the sergeant said at last, in a tone which dissociated him from all connexion with such an unneighbourly document.

'Did they so?' exclaimed Dan, as if he was shocked by the thoughtlessness of the authorities.

'So whenever 'twould be convenient for you -'

'Well, now you mention it,' said Dan, by way of throwing out a suggestion for debate, 'I could go with you now.'

'Ah, sha, what do you want going at this hour for?' protested the sergeant with a wave of his hand, dismissing the notion as



the tone required.

'Or I could go tomorrow,' added Dan, warming to the issue.

'Would it be suitable for you now?' asked the sergeant, scaling up his voice accordingly.

'But, as a matter of fact,' said the old man emphatically, 'the day that would be most convenient to me would be Friday after dinner, because I have some messages to do in town, and I wouldn't have the journey for nothing.'

'Friday will do grand,' said the sergeant with relief that this delicate matter was now practically disposed of. 'If it doesn't they can damn well wait. You could walk in there yourself when it suits you and tell them I sent you.'

'I'd rather have yourself there, sergeant, if it would be no inconvenience. As it is, I'd feel a bit shy.'

'Why then, you needn't feel shy at all.

There's a man from my own parish there, a warder; one Whelan. Ask for him; I'll tell him you're coming, and I'll guarantee when he knows you're a friend of mine he'll make you as comfortable as if you were at home.'

'I'd like that fine,' Dan said with profound satisfaction. 'I'd like to be with friends, sergeant.'

'You will be, never fear. Good-bye again now, Dan. I'll have to hurry.'

'Wait now, wait till I see you to the road.'

Together the two men strolled down the laneway while Dan explained how it was that he, a respectable old man, had had the grave misfortune to open the head of another old man in such a way as to require his removal to hospital, and why it was that he couldn't give the old man in question the satisfaction of paying in cash for an injury brought about through the victim's own unmannerly method of argument.

'You see, sergeant,' Dan said, looking at another little cottage up the hill, 'the way it is, he's there now, and he's looking at us as sure as there's a glimmer of sight in his weak, wandering, watery eyes, and nothing would give him more gratification than for me to pay. But I'll punish him. I'll lie on bare boards for him. I'll suffer for him, sergeant, so that neither he nor any of his children after him will be able to raise their heads for the shame of it.'

On the following Friday he made ready his donkey and butt and set out. On his way he collected a number of neighbours who wished to bid him farewell. At the top of the hill he stopped to send them back. An old man, sitting in the sunlight, hastily made his way indoors, and a moment later the door of his cottage was quietly closed.

Having shaken all his friends by the hand, Dan lashed the old donkey, shouted: 'Hup there!' and set out alone along the road to prison.

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Renegade

by John F. Deane

The Golden Strand stretches in a gentle curve from the hill road to the rocky headland. The Atlantic Ocean lifts and drops its tides through Blacksod Bay and is never more than gently wild. It was always a source of pain to me when that strand was soiled with the dung of cattle crossing from field to field. And it was always a source of joy to watch, from the roadway, the small sand-dune hills behind the beach, the sand grown dry and lovely to the touch, where the rabbits played and gathered and darted quickly away into the mysterious dark mouths of their burrows. The marram grass grew in sharp little clumps and sea-edge flowers clustered among them, sea-thrift, sea-campion and maidenhair. It was plain to see that the rabbits relished their tiny realm, their feeding grounds, their sheltering places, their bolt-holes.

Father drove, slowly, round the commonage that was bounded by barbed wire fencing. From the small bridge over the river you could park the car and wait. I watched the yellow iris sway and dip with the breezes; they stood, contented, by the edge of the tawny water that flowed beneath the bridge. Soon the rabbits would come out again, cautiously, one by one, as if they signalled safety to one another. It was beautiful to watch, these gentle folks congregating in silence, stopping, listening, then hopping softly in among the grasses and wild flowers, peaceful, but always watchful, always on the alert. I could see the adults, their ears raised like small watchtowers, and then the younger ones, playful and at peace in the shadow of the elders. Father pointed out some of the braver ones, the little ones who wished to move further than the safe ground of sand and sea-grasses, and how the adults quickly shepherded them back to safety once again. It was wonderful. It was a kind of prayer. A breathing of peace. And I was with my father in the car. He and I. Watching. How I loved him, then, there and always.

He took me fishing to the furthest end of the Golden Strand, over by the rocks where the land moved out into the sea to

form a low headland. We left the car up at the old football pitch that was laid out close to the sand dunes and the rabbits. The goalposts were still there, leaning over before the Atlantic winds, creaking softly as if their old bones ached. The chalk marks had long been erased but the raking winds kept the grasses low. Beyond the pitch was grassland tempered by sand for the winds were always blowing through the sand, lifting it from the beach and shifting it in over the earth, gnawing perpetually at the edge of the grounded world. There were tiny flowers down among the grasses, some scarlet pimpernel lying very low against the ground, the little plant Father called the wild pineapple, its scent so reminiscent of that great exotic fruit.

I walked tall and proud as we crossed that grass towards the rocks at the end of the strand; I had my own fishing rod, one my father no longer used. He had a new one, bigger and more complicated. I had been practising at home, out in the meadow, and had learned how to spin. I had mastered the heavy black reel, I could swing the rod from behind me so that the line flew out in a delightful arc, the silver-coated leaden lure would draw the green line far out over the meadow, then I would simply reel it back, slowly, jerking it now and again, to tease the imaginary fish among the grasses to make a lunge at the lure. Oh yes, I knew how to do it. I would be good at it. I might even catch a fish.

I walked beside my father, my rod held in my right hand, as he held his. The breeze chilled me a little but I could not admit to that. Father prepared the rods and stood me on a flat rock from which I could spin. The waves were slight; I was in no danger. He moved a little further along the rocks, took up his station and began to spin. I watched him for a while; his lure flew gracefully out into the sea, far, far out, and he began at once to reel it back in. He was silent and intent. This was a sacred game to him, a graced adventure, a blessed sport. A soft mist began to fall and a great surge of disappointment went through me, but he carried on; what was a little mist to

two great adventurers such as we? I tried my rod. I swung. The lure flew out, true and holy, its little splash not very far out in the sea, but enough. I began to reel it back in. Father waved to me; I was content.

Several times I drew it in and cast it out again. I was praying hard, not for fish, not that, not yet. I was praying that the mist, moving ineluctably into a soft rain, might not wholly destroy this day. There was a silver rapidly moving shower finger-tapping on the surface of the sea before me and I saw the sprat, hundreds of them, race and leap and fall out of the water. I shouted and pointed to them. Father laughed. He knew the mackerel would be shoaling behind them, feeding frantically. We could win a great, a famous, catch.

I swung the rod again, excitement dragging my stomach. The line flew further out but dangerously close to the rocks with their burthen of swaying, reaching weeds. I began to wind in, quickly. It was too late. I was snagged. The tip of the rod bent dangerously; I tugged. It would not yield. The hooks were fast in the weeds about the rock. My dismay was awful. Tears of frustration came, almost at once. I tried everything, shifting my position, dragging the line this way, then that. But to no avail. The line was well and truly snagged.

I waited hopelessly. Father had caught two mackerel already and I could see that steely bracing of his body with the excitement. I was missing everything. The mackerel broke the surface of the sea in fast and fearsome eddies and the tiny sprat leaped out of the water before them. It looked like a sudden, desperate silver flame of water racing like a will o' the wisp across the surface. Father noticed my predicament. I hung my head in shame. He left down his rod and crossed the rocks towards me.

'You're caught in the rocks and weeds,' he said. 'Give me the rod.' He took the rod and tried to jerk and snatch the hook from its snag but it was firmly caught. I knew he did not want to pull too hard; the old rod itself might snap or he might lose the lure, and it was a special one, a long whorled piece of lead painted silver, with a red and spinning tail when it was pulled through the water; its three brass hooks were masked by that spinning tail. 'It's fouled,' he said quietly. 'You should have kept it way clear of the rocks.' He jerked and

tugged a while more. 'I'll have to wade out and release it,' he said, and I sensed the blame and frustration in his voice.

'But,' I said, 'you have no waders.'

He gazed out a moment on the sea. He decided quickly. 'Here,' he said. 'Hold the rod high and I'll follow the line out as far as I can.'

To my horror and dismay he began to loosen his shoes. He took them off and laid them carefully in a cleft of the rock where they would remain dry before the rain. Then his socks. He rolled them up and put them in the shoes. He opened the belt on his braces and I was stunned as he lowered his trousers; he wore big grey underpants and those, too, he removed. He did not look at me. I held the rod high, the line snaking out into the sea; I did not look at him, but I saw. His legs, his thighs, were very white, even vulnerable. He moved carefully into the water off the rock, his right hand holding the line, following its direction, his left hand holding his shirt up from the gentle waves. He waded out. His buttocks, too, were a shocking white to me and I was hurt, deeply hurt. As he moved further into the water he had to lift his shirt higher to avoid soaking it. Soon he was up to his waist in the ocean. He reached the rocks and I saw him tug and pull frantically. The rain was coming down harder all the time. I felt it on my face; I licked its flowing off my upper lip. Father raised his hand in a small triumph, and I saw the lure, the green gut attached. He turned to come back to shore.

I was even more hurt and more embarrassed. He moved slowly in towards me, one hand still holding the shirt out of the waves. He waded cautiously. I was stirred by the ugliness of a man's body, how unshapely it looked, the hips leveling with the thighs and stomach, as if there had been no waist to mark off the loveliness, the proportion. I could see his penis, it was pinched small and bleak by the cold Atlantic, the folds of his belly-flesh wrinkling. I was hurt, too, by the thin line of black hair that moved from his navel down to his penis, down to the tiny copse of grey-black hair that I had never seen before. I stood, holding the rod, downcast and maladroit. Poor son. Poor father. The rain-gusts came, stippling the surface of the water, and still the sea-sprat broke in hapless foam before

the mackerel shoals, though they were further out now, diminishing. I looked at my father once again and saw how the rain collected on his face, and fell, like tears.

We gathered ourselves together and went home. I was silent, and so was he. But not a syllable of reproach or blame from him; he was that kind of man, and I loved him. But in me there was a guilt, a deep-rooted sense of my own uselessness, my failure.

Then, next day, he began to teach me how to shoot. We were out in the back meadow again. He had a point 22 rifle; I loved the cold feel of the stock against my jaw, the straight black barrel, the two sightings on the top of the barrel. He put an old saucepan lid up on a post against the rhododendron hedge at the far end of the meadow. He loaded the gun, that big blunt cartridge with its pale red colour, its gold-coloured base, all rounded and smooth and deadly. He showed me how to cock the gun, how to aim, one eye closed, sighting down the barrel to the cold heart of the saucepan lid. I rested the rifle on a fence, I held myself stiff and steady. I sighted.

This was easy, I felt. I pulled the trigger. There was that gruesome bang; the gun leaped back against my shoulder, almost knocking me down. I looked over at the saucepan lid. It was undamaged, smug and cocksure of itself, there at the far end of the meadow. Father laughed. 'I would have warned you,' he said, 'but I wanted you to feel the difficulty, rather than me just telling you. Now, you must take time. You must relax. Concentrate, and focus. You must not rush to kill; you must love what you are aiming at, caress it gently, know its heart, its soul. Then you must caress the trigger, your finger loving it, gentling, never jerk it, do not rush. Embrace the enemy, be delicate about it. Caress the trigger. Caress the shoulder of the beast you are aiming at. Everything slow, slow, slow.'

I tried again. He was right. I took a deadly dislike to that saucepan lid but forced myself to think about it, how it rose there in its own smug self-satisfaction, how it was rounded and perfect and at home in the world. I sighted slowly, gently. I imagined myself almost kissing that saucepan lid, licking the heart of it with my warm tongue, gentling, gen-

ting. I pulled the trigger. The gun stayed still in my grip. When I went down to see the lid, I found I had shot a hole pea-perfect and clean through. I did it again. And again. At my feet, several empty cartridges. A saucepan lid at the far end of the meadow riddled through.

We stopped, later that day, near the bridge by the rabbit patch. We waited. It was a sunbright evening, warm and still. A slight breeze ruffled the yellow iris in the ditch below us. The tall scutch grasses whispered among themselves. And father said, 'There! See him! Big fellow. There among the lean-to grasses and the trailing vetch, can you see him?' I did. I had the rifle out the window, resting perfectly on the rolled-down glass. I sighted the old rabbit, a fine fellow for rabbit stew. There he sat, alert, vagrant, free-range. I saw the eager watchtowers of the ears, I knew the powerful muscles that would fling him, and his care, into instant flight, how they would disperse with impacting suddenness into their burrows. I sighted. Carefully. 'Focus,' father said, 'on the soft-flesh shoulder muscles where the bullet bites. Remember, love the creature, caress the trigger. It is a moment of love, of personal friendship, of fellowship. Then, only when you're perfectly at peace, pull the trigger. We'll have the best of good rabbit stew this evening!'

I sighted. I steadied myself. I lined up that fawn-coloured, upraised body. I could see the eye, round and small and black, alert, watchful, but its owner wholly unaware of my presence, of my eye on his. Suddenly I felt perplexed, for I, too, relish the vision I could image in its round, dark eye, the vision of its green-grass and sand-gold world easy under sunlight, I could sense its love and care for those small creatures close to its heart, I thought of him as a father, a father to those soft and beautiful creatures in their innocence there about him. I could imagine the blood that would stain that sand and leave the younger creatures lost, abandoned and unkempt. I sensed the delight they took in the sweet sorrel and sacred herbs of their surroundings and I took my finger from the trigger, handed back the rifle and shook my head. And we sat together a moment, that beloved father and I, and I felt embarrassed, ill at ease and absolved.

The Special Advisor

Tania Hershman

You did not apply for this job. You applied for another job, but they are offering you this one. You can't imagine that they would ever have advertised this job, though it is described simply enough. They do not give you time to think. You take it.

At home later, over dinner warmed from a can, you wonder what skills you possess that made them choose you. You decide that it is probably best not to ask.

This is what they have said you are to do. *When there is a summary execution, they said, anywhere in the world, you tell us what you think. You advise.*

All right, you said.

The first day, there are no summary executions.

You do not have to track them down yourself; there is a staff to do that. You attempt to make conversation with one of them. *Hello, you say. She does not turn away from her screen.*

The remainder of the first week, there are also no summary executions. You explore the building. You locate the fifth floor's kitchen, toilets, smoking balcony. You make coffee. You tidy your desk. You ask for stationery. Rubber bands. Paper clips. You make more coffee.

You receive your door plate. *Special Advisor, it says, on Summary Executions.* You wonder what you will tell your mother. This is not a title she can use to boast to her friends. My son the . . . You do not call her.

You meet another Special Advisor on the Monday morning of your second week. He is advising on something else. *Every now and then, we'll overlap, he says without going into details. You are the only one on Summary Executions, he tells you, as he stirs sugar into his coffee. You really want to ask what happened to the previous advisor, but you are somehow afraid. You tell yourself that this is foolish, that it is not as if he or she might have been . . .*

You smile. You want to appear pleasant, approachable. You feel that with

your job title you will have to make an effort. With your job title there might be assumptions.

At last: an execution! In a lawless country known for these things. You are provided with an outline of events; you must do research. *A quick memo within twelve hours, your friend the other Special Advisor tells you, eating a chocolate digestive. Then a more detailed report within twenty-four.* You thank him. You take your coffee and start to scour the online news sources. You find out how old the victim was, how many children he had. You find out that he had been in hiding after numerous incarcerations. That he was beheaded. You read that he was a poet. You look at a picture of him. You enlarge it and stare into his eyes for too long. You get up and pour more coffee.

That night, you order pizza and as you ask for extra mushrooms you imagine a large man with a large knife. When the pizza comes, you remove the mushrooms.

Your brief memo appears to have been sufficient enough not to warrant a response. Your boss's secretary smiles at you and you take this to be a good sign. You work on your longer report. You include translations of some of the victim's poems. You are pleased with this. You describe all the details you have found on the manner of the execution: the type of blade, where and how it has been manufactured throughout history. You are pleased with this, too. You insert the names of the murdered man's children, their ages. You give advice, with wording lifted from the directives you have been given.

*Unstable nation . . .
no indication of pattern . . .
strongly worded condemnation . . .
keeping a watchful eye . . .*

You send the document to print but then you find it difficult to stand up and walk over to the printer. Your knees are uncooperative. It takes more than fifteen minutes.

In bed that night, you see the man's eyes. A line from one of his poems, *Never done and we are never done*, rings through your dreams.

You happen to read an article about octopuses. *They are very intelligent, you say to your friend the other Special Advisor as you pour coffee. You tell him the story about the octopus whose brain the scientists were trying to research. They put him to sleep, inserted a probe, you say, and the octopus just pulled it out. Really?* says the other Special Advisor. *Just pulled it out?* *Wow!* Yes, you say. Then he asks if you'd like to have dinner sometime. You are surprised but you agree. Special Advisors should stick together, you think, as you look for a biscuit.

That night you have a date. Friends fixed you up with her. You are wary. You are nervous. She is a financial analyst. When she smiles and says, *So, what do you do?* you gulp wine, and then you tell her. Soon after, she goes to the bathroom. Soon after that, there is an emergency phone call, *she simply must . . .* and soon after that, you are alone with half a bottle of house red.

You finish it. You think of the octopus. You imagine his tentacle, gripping the wine bottle, pouring himself a glass. You are grinning to yourself as you pay the bill and walk out into the rain.

There is another one. The information is on your desk. An underworld kingpin, it seems. There is a picture of the kingpin's body. You understand for the first time the phrase *riddled with bullets*. You enlarge the picture but you cannot see his eyes. He has a wife. He has children. He doesn't write poetry. Another country in which *such executions are the norm although not a frequent occurrence*. You write your brief memo. You work on your report.

Your friend the other Special Advisor has chosen the restaurant. You meet him there. You are surprised when he orders wine without asking you. You did not do this the other night, with the failed date. You would not presume. But it is good wine. Very good wine. *Tell me more about cephalopods, says your friend. He leans in closer and you tell him what you remember: how an octopus has been known to*

carry a large shell around with him or her all day in case, at some point, shelter is needed. *Forward planning*, grins your friend.

Later, after several bottles of the excellent wine, your new friend the other Special Advisor puts his hand over yours. Shock is not the right word to describe your reaction. You cannot move your arm. You don't know where to look. *It's okay*, says your friend. *No rush*. He withdraws his hand. Pays the bill.

There are no more summary executions for the rest of the week. You do some general research. You wander around the building. You occasionally bump into your friend the other Special Advisor in the coffee room. You are not as embarrassed as you thought you would be.

On Friday morning, you sit at your desk, close your eyes and wonder if octopuses kill. Yes, for food, but each other? You try and picture an octopus wrapping all its tentacles around its enemy. And squeezing. It doesn't feel right. Your imaginary octopus lets go.

Later that day, your friend the other Special Advisor comes to your cubicle. *I have a surprise*, he says. He hands you a biscuit and tells you he will pick you up tomorrow. He won't reveal any more.

Sixty-five million years ago, says the researcher, standing in front of her tanks. You are staring at the octopus. The octopus might be staring at you, you aren't sure. *That's when their brains really started to develop*, she says. Your friend the other Special Advisor asks more questions and you hear them talk about nautilus. You hear the researcher describe one of her octopuses who, if the light in his tank is left on at night, will short-circuit it. You smile at this octopus. You move your hand in an almost-wave. One of the octopus's tentacles moves too. It may just be coincidence.

You turn to your friend. You touch his elbow. You smile.

That night is the first time you go to bed together. He just holds you. You have never been held like this. You listen to him breathe. You feel his heart pumping into you. You slowly slide your hands underneath his chest until it is as if you are just one four-armed and four-legged Special Advisor, holding on and on.

There is another execution. Three women. All have children. None are poets. But none are warriors either. You find their pictures, you look at their faces, you put the pictures under a pile on your desk, you get the pictures out from under the pile, you look at their faces again.

You try to get up and go for coffee. Your knees are unobliging. It takes over fifteen minutes. The other Special Advisor, who is now more than a friend, pours for you, says nothing, hands you chocolate digestives. When the others finally leave the kitchen, the other Special Advisor puts a hand on your shoulder. You take the coffee and the chocolate digestives back to your desk but when your hand moves towards the pictures of the three women, the shaking returns.

When you are in bed together, you and your lover, the other Special Advisor, do not talk about work. You compete with each other to unearth the funniest news items, the oddest things humans are doing. Siamese twins who make their fortunes from online trading. A two-year-old girl who has composed twelve symphonies. A space umbrella designed to shift rainstorms. There is rarely a time when you do not both have something fantastical to share, and when you have laughed, when you have made love – which you are astonished to find never makes you uncomfortable, inhibited, shy – you sometimes jointly wonder at the world in which this can be so. *Where is the normal?* you ask each other. *Where is the still?*

After a month, you are summoned for review. Your boss tells you that they are impressed with your thoroughness. Your boss begins to say something about your predecessor but stops himself. He looks towards the large windows of his office and out over the city. Then your boss turns back to you, a false smile on his face. He thanks you again, sees *no need for further review until the completion of the three-month probationary period*. You understand that you are doing well.

You had questions. You had the words of a poem under your tongue. You had many pairs of eyes inside your head, looking out through your eyes towards your boss as if he held answers. As you reach your desk, you hold on to your chair and

take a long deep breath. Then you move your computer mouse and watch the screensaver disintegrate.

There is a morning where you wake up and decide not to go to work. You do not call your boss. You do not call your lover, who has not spent the night because of working late. You do not phone anyone.

You leave your home and stand out in the street a while. You turn right and that is when you choose where you will go.

The researcher is surprised but friendly. The octopus does not seem surprised. You sit by the octopus's tank with the cup of tea the researcher made for you. You wonder about the octopus. You wonder if the octopus wonders about you. You try not to think of the poet, the kingpin, the three mothers.

You and the octopus have been there for several hours when you hear someone else come round the tanks towards you. You expect the researcher. Or perhaps your lover, worrying about you. But you do not know the woman. She is not wearing a lab coat. She looks at you as if you are who she has come to see. She does not look at the octopus.

I think we should talk, she says. *I think you want to meet me*.

You are confused. Is she an expert in cephalopods? Had you mentioned you wanted to learn more?

And then, as if you are slapped hard, you know exactly who she is.

You . . . you say. *You are my . . . You did my . . .*

She blinks twice, clears her throat. She looks away and then she looks right at you. *You see their faces*, she says. *You hear them. Their eyes are in you. They look out through your eyes. You have trouble with your knees. You find it hard to get out of the chair.*

Yes, you whisper. You can't look at her because she sees too much of you, so you stare at the octopus. Your chest is filled with something liquid. Your heart is swimming. Nothing is said out loud at all.

And then you open your mouth. And then you say: *I see them all the time I hear them I feel like they are watching me he wrote poems the body was full of holes they all had children so many children I don't understand how someone can how someone does what did they do the mothers the others he was just a poet well maybe one of them was criminal but the*

women the women they whisper in my ear how
is it that one person can do and to another and
what if I could what if we could what if it's just
pretending not to what if underneath the suits I
go into the coffee room and everyone's polite and
on my desk on my desk there is this pile there are
pictures and they stare at me and then my legs
don't work my knees don't work I can't slice
food without thinking and is this going on and
it just comes at me comes at me why is it com-
ing at me as if they are doing it for me doing it
to me for me his eyes his poems I can't I can't
I can't.

And when you are gasping too much
to carry on you feel a chaos and you turn
and the octopus is thrashing, whirling
round its tank, tentacles whacking and
slashing at the walls, at each other, at the
octopus's head and your heart is paddling
as you bend towards the tank, as you

whisper *Shhhhh, shhh*. Your new friend,
the former Special Advisor, kneels down
too and you both put your palms on
to the tank's cool glass, you press your
cheek there, and right then you cannot
remember who is in the tank and who
is outside. The octopus begins to slow
down, its tentacles sliding around the
tank, slipping towards its floor. Through
your cheek you feel the violence as it
ebbs away.

You hear voices and two researchers wan-
der into your section of the lab. When
they see you, they giggle and stare. Your
new friend lifts herself up and then she
holds out her hand to you. You let her
pull you to standing then you lean on the
top of the tank, your body still unsolid.
Sorry, you say.

Don't be, she says.

You leave the lab together. You take
the lift down and then you are in the
street, facing one another. You do not
know how this will end. You have no
idea how this will end.

Then she says what she says to you and,
like another slap, you know it all.

You don't have to, she says, and walks
away.

You watch her reach the end of the
street, then vanish. You think of open
landscapes, of the sea filled with every
type of life. You breathe in. You breathe
out. Your heart is sad but still. Your heart
is you. You think about your mother.
You realize it has been a long long time.
You turn and walk the other way, think-
ing of what you will tell her about your
day.