ETGAR KERET: FLY ALREADY. STORIES (2019)

TABULA RASA

For Ehud

SAD COW

A. had a recurring dream. He dreamed it almost every night, but in the morning, when Goodman or one of the instructors woke him and asked if he remembered what he had dreamed, he was always quick to say no. That wasn't because the dream was scary or embarrassing, it was just a stupid dream in which he was standing on top of a grassy hill beside an easel, painting the pastoral landscape in watercolors. The landscape in the dream was breathtaking, and since A. had come to the institution as a baby, the grassy hill was probably an imaginary place he had thought up or a real place he had seen in a picture or short film in one of his classes. The only thing that kept the dream from being completely pleasant was a huge cow with human eyes that was always grazing right next to A.'s easel. There was something infuriating about that cow: the spittle dripping from its mouth, the sad look it gave A., and the black spots on its back, which looked less like spots and more like a

map of the world. Every time A. had this dream, it aroused the same feelings in him—calm that turned into frustration that turned into anger that quickly turned into compassion. He never touched the cow in the dream—never—but he always wanted to. He remembered himself searching for a stone or some other weapon; he remembered himself wanting to kill the cow, but in the end, he always took pity on it. He never managed to finish the painting he was working on in the dream. He always woke up too soon, panting and sweating, unable to fall asleep again.

He didn't tell anyone about the dream. He wanted there to be one thing in the world that was his alone. With all those prying instructors around him and all the cameras placed in every corner of the institution, it was almost impossible for an orphan to keep something to himself, and the meadow with the sad cow staring at him was the closest thing to a secret that A. could have. Another reason, just as important, was that he didn't really like Goodman, and hiding the existence of the strange dream from him seemed to be a small but fitting act of revenge.

GOODMAN

Why, of all the people in the world, did A. hate more than anyone else the man who had helped him the most? Why did A. wish that bad things would happen to the person who had taken him under his wing after his parents had abandoned him and who had devoted his life to helping him and others who suffered the same fate? The answer was easy: If there's one thing

in the world more annoying than being dependent on someone, it's when that someone constantly reminds you that you are dependent on him. And Goodman was exactly that sort of person: insulting, controlling, patronizing. Every word he said, every gesture he made, carried the clear message—your fate is in my hands, and without me, you all would have died a long time ago.

The orphans in the institution spoke different languages and had little communication with one another, but they shared one essential biographical fact—all of them had been abandoned in the delivery room by their parents when they learned that their newborns had a disease. A genetic disease with a long Latin name. But they all called it "elderness" because it made all the babies born with it age ten times faster than ordinary people. The disease also enabled them to develop and learn much more quickly than ordinary people. As a result, by the age of two, A. had already mastered math, history, and physics at the high school level; knew many classical music pieces by heart; and his paintings and drawings were so adept that, according to Goodman, they could be exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the world.

But, as with all diseases, the advantages paled beside the disadvantages. The orphans knew that most of them would not reach the age of ten, that they would die from illnesses related to old age—cancer, stroke, a variety of heart problems—that their biological clocks would persist in ticking at an insane speed until their worn-out hearts ceased to pump. Over the years, the orphans heard their instructors tell them again and

again the same sad stories of their infancy, stories related with the same indifferent tone they used when reading them fairy tales before bed: how their mothers knew at the moment of their birth that their terrible death was racing toward them. And so they chose to abandon them. What parent wanted to bond with a newborn that arrived, like a carton of milk, with such a close expiration date?

At holiday meals, after drinking a bit, Goodman liked to tell the orphans how, as a young obstetrician, he first met a mother who had abandoned her elderness-afflicted baby, how he had adopted him, and within three years, had taught him everything that any other child required at least a dozen years to learn. His tone always emotional, Goodman described how that child had developed right before his eyes at an insane speed reminiscent of the way a plant in time-lapse photography grows, sprouting, developing, blossoming, and withering, all in less than a minute. Goodman would talk about how, at the same time and at an equally rapid pace, his plan was developing to help all those abandoned babies left alone to face the enormous challenges their disease posed. The institution that Goodman founded in Switzerland took in all those sick, brilliant, unwanted children and designed an individual curriculum for each one aimed at preparing them as quickly as possible to go out into the world where they could live their terrifyingly brief lives independently. Every time he told his story, Goodman reached the end with tears in his eyes and the orphans would jump to their feet, applauding and cheering, and A. would

stand up and applaud, too, but no sound would emerge from his mouth.

In order for the orphans to go out into the world, they were required by Goodman to pass a life-skills exam. Given once a month, the exam was geared to the particular curriculum of each orphan, and those who received a perfect score went on to a personal interview. According to the rumors, Goodman asked especially difficult questions at the interview; attacked, insulted, and sometimes even struck the interviewees. But if you managed to survive, you could walk out of the institution armed with an identity card, a letter of recommendation that detailed your skills, one thousand Swiss francs, and a train ticket to a nearby city.

NADIA

A. wanted more than anything to leave the institution. More than he wanted to kiss a woman, or hear a divine concerto performed by angels, or paint a perfect painting, A. yearned to pass that exam and the interview that followed it and live out his remaining brief life on a grassy hill under blue skies, among normal people, and not only rapidly aging children and their instructors.

A. failed the monthly life-skills exam nineteen times. During that period, he saw many other orphans leave the institution, some younger than he was and some not half as smart or as determined. But he promised N. that he would pass the next

exam in April. N. also studied painting, which meant that A. saw her almost every day, but since A.'s first language was German and N.'s was French, communication between them was somewhat limited. This didn't prevent A. from giving her a small gift every day: an origami seagull he made and painted for her, a real flower he stole from a vase in the dining hall, a drawing of a winged creature that resembled N. soaring above a towering barbed-wire fence.

N. insisted on calling A. by the name she made up for him, Antoine, and he called her Nadia, after a sad, agile Romanian gymnast he had once seen in an old black-and-white film clip. According to the rules of the institution, the orphans were given full names with matching documents only on the day they left the institution. Until then, it was absolutely forbidden to call them by any name or nickname but the identifying letter they were assigned the day they arrived. A. knew that when he and Nadia left the institution, they would receive totally different names and the entire world would call them by those new names, but for him, she would always be Nadia.

THE SECRET DONOR

The agreement between A. and Nadia was simple. It was more a wish than an agreement—they promised each other that they would do everything in their power to pass the exam and the interview, and when they went out into the world, they would live the rest of their lives together.

The institution was funded entirely by donations, and each of the orphans had a personal, secret donor. It was the personal donor who determined the orphan's identifying letter, his future name, his curriculum, and the destination on the train ticket he would receive the day he left the institution. Since Nadia was a French speaker and A. spoke German, they assumed that their train tickets would send them to different cities in Switzerland where they could speak their languages, so they agreed on a plan: The first to reach the train station would carve the name of the destination city on the northernmost bench found there, and upon reaching that city would go to the main entrance of the central train station at exactly seven every morning until they were reunited. But first of all, they both had to pass the exam. Nadia's secret donor wanted her to be a doctor, that was absolutely clear from her personal curriculum. She had failed the anatomy section of her last exam, but she promised A. that this time she would come prepared.

The future that A.'s secret donor wished for him was a bit less clear. Along with his art classes, A.'s personal curriculum placed special emphasis on social and verbal skills, and, among other things, he learned to debate and write carefully reasoned essays. Did A.'s donor want him to grow up to be a leading artist in his field? A lawyer? An essayist or critic? Possibly. In any case, he apparently wanted A. to grow the kind of thick, wild beard suitable to a bohemian, because unlike the other orphans, A. had never received shaving gear, and when he once tried to raise the subject with Goodman, Goodman put an end to the matter with

a curt suggestion that A. focus on the upcoming exam instead of "wasting time on nonsense." For his part, A. believed that the donor wanted him to grow a beard because he himself had one. Once he saw Goodman through the gym window talking with an old man who had a long white beard. A. was running laps around the gym and could clearly see Goodman pointing at him and the old man watching him intently and nodding. What could make that old man invest so much of his money on the education of an abandoned child? Kindness? Generosity? The desire to atone for terrible things he had done in his life? And why had he chosen to support a genetically damaged child and not, say, a child prodigy who, with his help, might develop his extraordinary talents and advance all of mankind? A. wondered if he would do something similar for a sick child if he himself were healthy and rich. Maybe there was an alternative universe in which A. was the one standing next to Goodman and pointing at a child, maybe even at Nadia, describing her development, her hobbies, her chances of passing the exam and living the rest of her life in the wild, unprotected world that surrounded them.

THE APRIL EXAM

The time allotted for the written exam was four hours. A. had finished previous exams at the very last minute, and twice he'd had to hand them in without answering all the questions. But this time, he finished twenty-five minutes before the time was up and put down his pen. The instructor asked him if he wanted

to hand in his exam, but A. declined. Too much was at stake. He reread his answers painstakingly, corrected punctuation mistakes, and rewrote words he was afraid he hadn't written clearly enough. When time was up, he knew that he was handing in a perfect exam. And, sure enough, among the seven orphans who took the April exam, only he and Nadia went on to the interview.

He saw her as she walked out of her interview with Goodman. She couldn't tell him anything because her personal instructor was right beside her, but her glowing face told him everything. Now all A. had to do was pass the interview with Goodman—and they would both be out of there. Which of them would reach the train station first? Which would be the one to carve his or her destination on the bench? But would there even be a bench? A. was suddenly filled with anxiety. His dream had been not only to leave the institution but to leave it and live with Nadia. What if, because of some tiny hole in their plan, they missed each other? After all, neither of them would know the other's new name, and if neither of them managed to leave their future city, they might never meet again.

"What are you thinking about?" Goodman asked.

"My life. The future waiting for me outside," A. whispered, and immediately added, obsequiously, "and how much I owe this institution, especially you, for bringing me to this moment."

"You sound as if you've finished your business here and you're already waving a white handkerchief at me from the train window," Goodman said, twisting his face into an ugly

smile. "As someone who failed the exam nineteen times, that's a bit arrogant on your part, don't you think?"

"This time I passed," A. stammered, "I'm sure of it."

"*You're* sure of it," Goodman interrupted, "but *I*, unfortunately, am a bit less sure."

"This time all the answers were correct," A. persisted.

"Ah," Goodman said patronizingly, "I don't doubt that, either. But an exam is not judged only by the right answers written on the page. Concealed behind the factual answer is intention and character, and with regard to those, I'm afraid you still have much work left to do."

A. stood there, stunned. He searched his feverish brain for an irrefutable claim that would make Goodman change his mind, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was, "I hate you."

"That's fine," Goodman said, nodding, and immediately pressed the intercom button and asked for A.'s personal instructor to come and take him back to his room. "It's good that you hate me. That's part of your development. I don't do what I do to be loved."

"I hate you," A. repeated, feeling the rage rise inside him, "you may think you're a good person, but you're arrogant and evil. Every night before I go to sleep, I close my eyes and imagine myself getting up in the morning and finding out that you're dead."

"That's perfectly all right," Goodman said, "the punishments I give you, the hatred you have for me, they are all part of the process that is supposed to prepare you for a greater purpose. And affection for me or gratitude is not part of that purpose."

THE ESCAPE

It took four security guards to pull A. off Goodman. After the short, violent struggle with them, A. came away with a black eye, a huge bruise on his forehead, and two broken fingers on his left hand, but not only that. He also came away with a security guard's identification tag, which he managed to tear off him as they fought and hide in his pocket without anyone noticing.

That night, A. pretended to be asleep, and at one in the morning, silently climbed out of bed. With the stolen tag, he knew that he could get out of the wing where the orphans were housed. West of that wing was the guest wing, where the orphans were forbidden to enter, and past that was the exit gate. A. had never walked through that gate, but he was sure that the security guard's identification tag would open it for him. And if it didn't, he would climb over it, dig under it, or pass right through it; he would do anything he needed to get out of there.

A. proceeded along the corridor that led to the guest wing and, using the identification tag, opened the heavy iron door. This wing was where the secret donors stayed when they came on periodic visits for updates on their protégés' progress. A. had always pictured that wing as a sort of luxury hotel with a huge dining hall and hanging chandeliers, but now it looked completely different. Its main corridor resembled a corridor in an

office building, and every door along it led to a room that looked like a stage set: one looked like a military bunker; another like an elementary school classroom; and the third had a fancy swimming pool with a naked corpse floating in the middle of it.

A. lit his way with an old flashlight he found in the room designed to be a bunker, and focused the light on the corpse's face. It looked like a pulpy mass of flesh and blood now, but A. recognized it immediately: he jumped into the water and embraced Nadia's naked corpse. He was crushed. Devastated. Completely destroyed. This escape was supposed to take him outside to the better life he wanted more than anything, but now, all at once, that desire had been snuffed out. Without Nadia at his side, he had no desire for anything anymore. He heard someone flush a toilet and raised his head. A short, skinny redheaded man in a bathing suit came out of the men's dressing room. He saw A. and immediately began to shout in French, and in seconds, the room filled with security guards. The redhead told them something in a hoarse voice and pointed to A. and the corpse. The guards jumped into the water and tried to separate A. and Nadia, but A. refused to let her go. His last memory was of the strong smell of the chlorine and blood, and then darkness.

ANGER AND VIRTUES

A. woke up tied to a chair. He was in the first room he'd seen in the guest wing, the dusty military bunker where he found the flashlight. Goodman was standing beside him.

"Someone killed N.," he said in a choked voice.

"I know," Goodman said, nodding.

"I think it was a redheaded man, short . . ." A. groaned.

"It's okay," Goodman said, "she belonged to him."

"It's not okay," A. wailed, "she was murdered! You have to call the police . . ."

"In order to be murdered, you first have to be a person," Goodman said in a didactic tone, "and N. wasn't a person."

"How dare you say that? N. was a wonderful person, a good woman . . ."

"N. was a clone. She was a clone of Natalie Loreaux, the wife of the man who ordered her. Philippe, the short man you saw." A. opened his mouth to speak, but air refused to enter his lungs. The room spun, and if he hadn't been tied to his chair, he would certainly have fallen.

"You have nothing to worry about," Goodman said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "The real Nathalie Loreaux is still alive and waiting impatiently for her husband, Philippe, to come back from his short business trip to Switzerland. Now that Philippe has vented his anger on her clone, she will welcome back a much calmer and more loving husband. I can only assume that when Philippe gets home, he'll appreciate Nathalie's virtues a great deal more, and you and I both know that she has quite a few of those."

"But he killed her . . ." A. mumbled.

"No," Goodman corrected, "he destroyed a clone."

"She was a person . . ." A. insisted.

"She *looked* like a person," Goodman corrected him again, "just as you look like a person."

"I *am* a person!" A. shrieked. "I was born with elderness and was abandoned by my . . ."

But the disdainful look in Goodman's eyes kept him from completing his sentence. "Am I a clone, too?" A. asked, tears in his eyes, "Was I ordered by someone close to me who hates me?"

"No," Goodman said with a smile, "with you, it's a bit more complicated."

"Complicated?" A. mumbled, and Goodman took a small mirror out of his pocket and held it in front of A.'s face. In the mirror, A. could see, along with the black eye and some dried blood under his left eyebrow, that his thick beard had been completely shaved off, leaving only a really small, squarish mustache under his nose, and his hair was combed to the side in a strange and ugly way. Now, as he looked into the mirror, A. saw for the first time that he was wearing a brown army uniform. "Your name, my dear A., is Adolf," Goodman said, "and your owner will be here any minute now."

TABULA RASA

The old man with the beard gave A. a scrutinizing look. "You can move closer to him, Mr. Klein," Goodman said. "He's tied up, he can't hurt you."

"I must admit that he really looks like him," the old man whispered in a shaky voice.

"He doesn't just *look* like him," Goodman corrected him, "he *is* him. One hundred percent Adolf Hitler. Not just the body, but also the mind: the same knowledge, the same temperament, the same talents. I want to show you something." Goodman took a small tablet out of his leather bag and placed it in front of the old man. A. couldn't see the screen, but he could hear his own voice coming from the computer. He heard himself scream at Goodman that he hated him and wished he would die.

"Did you see?" Goodman said proudly. "Did you watch his hand movements? Now look at this." A. suddenly heard his voice saying things he had never said, a speech about a strong Germany that would kneel before no one. Goodman stopped the film. "See?" he said to the old man. "They're exactly the same. We took his mind, tabula rasa, and poured everything into it. We've been preparing him for this day from the minute he took his first breath."

Goodman took a gun and a knife from his bag and offered them both to the old man. "I didn't know which you preferred," he said, and shrugged. "Do whatever you want to him. I, with your permission, will wait right outside."

THE FINAL SOLUTION

The old man pointed the gun at A.'s forehead. "I've been waiting my whole life for this moment," he said, "already in the ghetto, when I lost my parents and my brother, I swore to

survive and take revenge on the person who murdered my family."

"Shoot," A. urged him, "get it over with. I don't have anything to live for anyway."

"This is not how it's supposed to be," the old man said angrily, "you're supposed to cry now, to beg for your life."

"I'm also supposed to be the man responsible for the extermination of millions and not a clone created in a laboratory who never hurt a living soul," A. replied, smiling crookedly. "I'm sorry, but a person who insists on avenging the dead eighty years after the fact has to make some compromises."

The old man's hand began to shake. "You're Hitler," he cried, "you're a cunning devil who, even now, in your last moments, keeps trying to play tricks . . ."

"I'm Antoine," A. whispered and closed his eyes. He pictured Nadia and himself on the top of that grassy hill, standing in front of matching easels, painting a sunset as red as blood. The metallic click of the gun being cocked sounded so far away now.