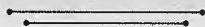


ETGAR KERET: FLY ALREADY. STORIES
(2019)

FLY ALREADY



P.T. sees him first. We're on our way to the park to play ball when he suddenly says, "Daddy, look!" His head is tilted back and he's squinting hard to see something far above me, and before I can even begin to imagine an alien spaceship or a piano about to fall on our heads, my gut tells me that something really bad is happening here. But when I turn to see what P.T. is looking at, all I notice is an ugly, four-story building covered in plaster and air conditioners, as if it has some kind of skin disease. The sun is sitting directly on it, slightly blinding me, and as I'm trying to get a better angle, I hear P.T. say, "He wants to fly." Now I can see a guy in a white button-down shirt standing on the roof railing looking straight at me, and behind me, P.T. whispers, "Is he a superhero?" But instead of answering him, I shout at the guy, "Don't do it!"

The guy stares at me and doesn't answer. I shout at him again, "Don't do it, please! Whatever brought you up there

must seem like something you'll never get over, but believe me, you will. If you jump now, you'll leave this world with that dead-end feeling. That'll be your last memory of life. Not family, not love—only defeat. But if you stay, I swear to you by everything I hold dear that your pain will start to fade, and in a few years, the only thing left will be a weird story you tell people over a beer. A story about how you once wanted to jump off a roof and some guy standing below shouted at you . . .”

“What?” the guy on the roof yells back at me, pointing at his ear. He probably can't hear me because of the noise coming from the road. Or maybe it isn't the noise, because I heard his “What?” perfectly well. Maybe he's just hard of hearing. P.T., who's hugging my thighs without being able to encircle them completely, as if I were some kind of giant baobab tree, yells at the guy, “Do you have superpowers?” but the guy points at his ear again as if to say he can't hear, and shouts, “I'm sick of it! Enough! How much can I take?” P.T. shouts back at him, as if they were having the most ordinary conversation in the world, “Come on, fly already!” And I'm starting to feel that stress, the stress that comes with knowing that it's all on you.

I have it a lot at work. With the family too, but not as much. Like what happened on the way to Lake Kinneret, when I tried to brake and the tires locked. The car started to skid along the road and I said to myself, “Either you fix this or it's all over.” That time, driving to the Dead Sea, I didn't fix it, and Liat, the only one not buckled in, died, and I was left alone with the kids.

P.T. was two and barely knew how to speak, but Amit never stopped asking me, “When is Mommy coming back? When is Mommy coming back?” and I'm talking about *after* the funeral. He was eight then, an age when you're supposed to understand what it means when someone dies, but he kept asking. And even without the constant, annoying questions, I knew that everything was my fault and wanted to end it all. Just like the guy on the roof. But here I am today, walking without crutches, living with Simona, a good dad. I want to tell the guy on the roof all about it, I want to tell him that I know exactly how he feels right now, and that if he doesn't flatten himself like a pizza on the sidewalk, it'll pass. I know what I'm talking about, because no one on this blue planet was as miserable as I was. He just has to get down from there and give himself a week. A month. Even a year, if necessary.

But how can you say all that to a guy who's half deaf? Meanwhile, P.T. pulls my hand and says, “He's not going to fly today anyway, Daddy, let's go to the park before it gets dark.” But I stay where I am and shout as loudly as I can, “People die like flies all the time, even without killing themselves. Don't do it! Please don't do it!” The guy on the roof nods—it looks like this time, he heard something—and shouts back at me, “How did you know? How did you know she died?” Someone always dies, I want to yell back at him. Always. If not her, then someone else. But that won't get him down from there, so instead I shout, “There's a kid here,” and point at P.T., “he doesn't need to see this.” Then P.T. yells, “Yes I do! Yes I do! Come on and fly

already, before it gets dark!" It's December, and it really does get dark early.

If he jumps, that'll be on my conscience, too. Irena the psychologist at the clinic will give me that "After you I'm going home" look of hers and say, "You're not responsible for everyone. You have to get that into your head." And I'll nod, because I know that the session ends in two minutes and she has to pick up her daughter from day care, but it won't change anything because I'll have to carry that half-deaf guy on my back, along with Liat and Amit's glass eye. I have to save him. "Wait there for me!" I scream as loudly as I can. "I'm coming up to talk to you!"

"I can't go on without her. I can't!" he shouts. "Wait a minute," I yell, and say to P.T., "Come on, sweetie, let's go up to the roof." P.T. gives an adorable shake of his head, the way he always does right before he sticks the knife in, and says, "If he flies, we can see better from here."

"He won't fly," I say, "not today. Let's go up there just for a minute. Daddy has to tell the man something." But P.T. persists. "So yell from here." His arm slips out of my grasp and he throws himself down on the ground, the way he likes to do to Simona and me at the mall. "Let's race to the roof," I say. "If we get there without stopping, P.T. and Daddy get ice cream as a prize."

"Ice cream now," P.T. wails, rolling around on the sidewalk, "ice cream now!" I have no time for this crap. I pick him up. He squirms and screams, but I ignore it and start running toward the building.

"What happened to the kid?" I hear the guy shout from the roof. I don't answer, and race into the building. Maybe his curiosity will stop him for now. Maybe it'll keep him from jumping long enough for me to get up to the roof.

The kid is heavy. It's hard to climb all those stairs when you're holding a five-and-a-half-year-old kid in your arms, especially one who doesn't want to go up the stairs. By the third floor, I'm completely out of breath. A fat redhead who must have heard P.T.'s screams opens her door a crack and asks who I'm looking for, but I ignore her and keep climbing. Even if I want to say something to her, I don't have enough air in my lungs.

"No one lives upstairs," she shouts after me, "it's just the roof." When she says "roof," her shrill voice breaks and P.T. yells back at her in a tear-filled voice, "Ice cream now! Now!" I don't have a free hand to push open the door that should lead outside—my arms are full of P.T., who doesn't stop flailing—so I kick it as hard as I can. The roof is empty. The guy who was on the railing a minute ago isn't there anymore. He didn't wait for us. Didn't wait to find out why the kid was screaming.

"He flew," P.T. sobs, "he flew and because of you we didn't see anything!" I start walking toward the railing. Maybe he changed his mind and went back into the building, I try to tell myself. But I don't believe it. I know he's down there, his body sprawled on the sidewalk at an unnatural angle. I know it, and I have a kid in my arms who absolutely should not see that because it'll traumatize him for the rest of his life, and he's already been through enough. But my legs take me to the edge of the

roof. It's like scratching a wound, like ordering another shot of Chivas when you know you've already had too much to drink, like driving a car when you know you're tired, so tired.

Now that we're right at the railing, we start to feel the height. P.T. stops crying and I can hear both of us panting and the ambulance siren in the distance. It seems to be asking me, "Why? Why do you need to see it? You think it'll change anything? Make anyone feel better?" Suddenly, the redhead's shrill voice commands me from behind, "Put him down!" I turn around, not really understanding what she wants. "Put me down," P.T. shouts, too. It always gets him going when a stranger butts in.

"He's just a kid," the redhead keeps saying, but her voice is suddenly cracked and soft. She's on the verge of tears. The sound of the siren is getting closer and the redhead starts walking toward me. "I know you're suffering," she says, "I know that everything is so hard. I know, believe me." There's so much pain in her voice that even P.T. stops flailing and stares at her, mesmerized. "Look at me," she whispers, "fat, alone. I had a child once, too. You know what it is to lose a child? Do you have any idea of what you're about to do?" Still in my arms, P.T. hugs me tight. "Look at what a sweet child he is," she says, already close to us, her thick hand stroking P.T.'s hair.

"There was a man here," P.T. says, fixing his huge green eyes, Liat's eyes, on her. "There was a man here, but now he flew away. And because of Daddy, we didn't see him." The siren stops right under us and I take another step toward the railing,

but the redhead's sweaty hand grabs mine—"Don't do it," she says, "please, don't do it."

P.T. has a scoop of vanilla in a plastic cup. I order pistachio and chocolate chip in a cone. The redhead asks for a chocolate milk shake. All the tables in the ice cream parlor are filthy, so I clean one for us. P.T. insists on tasting the milkshake and she lets him. She's called Liat, too. It's a common name. She doesn't know about our Liat, about the accident; she doesn't know anything about us. And I don't know anything about her. Except that she lost her kid. When we left the building, they were putting the guy's body into the ambulance. Luckily, it was covered with a white sheet. One less image of a corpse in my mind. The ice cream is too sweet for me, but P.T. and the redhead look happy. With his cone in one hand, he reaches out for her milkshake with the other. I don't know why he always does that; after all, he's still eating his ice cream, why does he need more? I open my mouth to say something to him, but the redhead signals that it's okay and gives him her almost empty cup. Her son's dead, my wife's dead, the guy on the roof is dead. "He's so cute," she whispers as P.T. strains to suck up the last drop of milkshake in the paper cup. He really is cute.