

Jacob Paul

From the Diary of Sarah Sara

August 21

Ice, snow, grey skies, hangover, negative outlook, can't sleep, won't write.

August 22

I'm as grey as the ice and the snow, empty as the clear glass of the top half of my bottle, flat as the backlit fog. At least I won't have to worry about keeping Shabbat this week; the ice will enforce a day of rest (another day of rest). My muscles are starting to cramp from inactivity. I'm chilly. The cold's here. This is the third day of nearly identical weather. Wind pushes fog swirls like curling stage smoke, muting daylight arrhythmically, a world of frequent and irregular almost night and almost day inside a universe of near-night, near-day. I wonder where I am. Just how far is it from here to Aklivuk? Imagine if it were so close that I could simply pack up a bag and walk there in a day. Imagine. (But then I'm forgetting Shingle Point, which may or may not lie ahead of me, may or may not be a full-scale town, and may or may not have slipped behind me when I wasn't looking). If only I could vaguely see my way through the fog I might stretch my legs, exercise this body that already feels atrophied, stale.

At least I'm not as hung over as I was yesterday. I couldn't even summon the focus to write. I walked outside, inside, muscles aching, skin itching, no position comfortable. Starving, of course, yet repulsed by food, unable to eat, I tried to read back over my exploits thus far, but the writing was static on the page, letters randomly shifting in and out of focus, disconnected from sense and context. Eventually, I abandoned that pastime as well. I strove to stay awake until nightfall. But I fell asleep, an uneasy sleep, bothered by a restless stomach and dreaming of a cornucopia of dehydrated peas, carrots and turkey, rice and noodles

You reach a certain point, level, continuance, of discomfort, and it seems impossible to ever recover from it. I'm there now. It seems like I'll feel this way forever. But then, soon, I'll continue forward on my trip, and then I'll reach the end. There will be showers, hot food, congratulatory toasts,

maybe a write-up in the local paper; headline: Jerusalem Terror Survivor Solos Stretch of Arctic. Everything will seem simpler. The trip's bad days will compress and vanish, spectacular moments multiply in retelling. But right now, it seems endless.

Those aspects of daily existence that make life worth living lie on one side of a scale and those that make it unbearable on the other; and I pin so many of my hopes on the presumption that with time, the balance will swing in favor of life. Which, when considered, means that I am living solely for the future. And what does the future hold?

After leaving Udi, Sara will ride back to Bait viGan. As always, her mental calculus of doom will come somewhat into play—she'll consider which stops will most likely be targeted, imagine the faces of other passengers reprinted in black news type. In fact, Sara will have grown so accustomed to the physiological arc of fear as to not pay it much mind at all. She understands that her fears are statistically irrational. She forces herself to ride buses everywhere, never taking cabs, thus empirically establishing her safety. But those intellectual truths, looping through her mind on permanent auto-playback, aren't working. Perhaps her sense of defeat after meeting with Udi will contribute to her general lack of mental discipline. Whatever it is, the group of Chasidic high-school girls crowded against her since she transferred buses at Beit Elan will make her feel like the bull's-eye in a prime target. Sara will inhale deeply through her nose, close her eyes, and attempt to marvel at the great and real danger she overcame in the Arctic. Instead, the smell of fried chicken schnitzel emanating from one of the girls' clothing will make her think of Shabbat dinner. That in turn, inevitably, calls to mind Dalia's group of survivors, though Dalia would never serve anything as pedestrian—and old Eastern Europe—as schnitzel. Yes, odds will stand strongly, starkly against anything wrong happening on the number seventeen bus. But every one of them there at dinner, starting with Dalia, had been at the intersection of freak chance and malevolent act. And it had happened to Sara. And to her parents, twice. You can't really rely on stochastic modeling. There's always a hundred percent chance of survival or of death. You only know which after the fact. But that unknowing is the most unbearable of all the burdens weighting the scale in favor of death.

Sara's eyes will open against her will at each stop until she squeezes into a seat and finds herself waist level with the bevy of long black skirts. It's easier to keep her eyes closed sitting, easier to concentrate on cyclic breathing. As always, she debates saying tehillim. On the one hand, doing so wards off danger, on the other hand, resorting to them acknowledges her expectation of calamity. She won't say tehillim. Instead, she'll gently murmur to

herself, "You've always made it, always made it." But even then, her hands will involuntarily slip up around the scar that was her ear, and rub the rough tissue there (a habit I have now, but have not chosen to record). At the Braishit shopping center, many more people will push onto the bus. Unable to force her eyes closed, Sara will scan and assess the threat potential of each new passenger. Her pulse will race when a young woman with nervous, almond eyes and layers of clothing covering an oddly shaped body pushes towards the center of the bus. But then the woman will turn and talk to a friend who laughs; suicide bombers don't board buses in pairs; Sara will exhale.

The line will stop as the driver stands up. All sound will fade into the blood pounding through Sara's skull like frantic war drums. There must be some problem, an alert, something. She will find a view between two of the yeshiva girls' cloaked shoulders. The driver will demand that an Arab man (Israeli or Palestinian, she can't tell) step down from the bus and open his large backpack. Collective murmuring ripples back and forth through the bus as those still waiting to board will step away from where the man stands opening his bag.

Obediently, he will take out a bag lunch and display an orange, a chunk of black bread, a Tupperware container of hummus. What looks like several university text books will follow and finally a large box covered in wrapping paper with a homemade card taped to it. The man will gesture with a broad hand motion that this is all he has, see, there's no problem, let's everybody get back on the bus. But the bus driver will point at the wrapped box, and indistinctly, Sara will overhear or understand, she won't quite know which, him order the man to open that too. And the man's hand will fly up in protest. He will begin to shout. Sara will distinctly hear him say, "I'm an Israeli citizen. This is an anniversary gift for my wife." Everyone on the bus will gasp as the man reaches into his back pocket, and sigh as he pulls out nothing more dangerous than an Israeli passport.

Still the bus driver will insist that the man open the package. To Sara's left someone will whisper that this is a perfect example of the kind of humiliation he had been talking about that would lead to a third front. The girls in front of her will mutter that no Arabs belong in the land anyway; it serves the man right to open the package. Apparently, the man's box will not explode; Sara will lean forward to catch a glimpse at what he takes out. But inside the box there will be another box, also gift wrapped. The man will pause but then when the bus driver motions, he will continue unwrapping this box. And inside of it will be another yet smaller gift-wrapped box. This time, the man won't even ask, but simply unwrap it. In all, he will unwrap five successive

boxes before revealing a small wooden jewelry case. No longer hesitating, the man will open the case and take out its single content, a silver locket on a thin chain. Of course, Sara will not be able to see the picture in it, which the man will show to the driver. But she will be able to distinctly hear him say over the now hushed crowd, "It's our only son."

The bus driver will wave, he's sorry, and shrug to show, what can you do these days, and offer to shake. But the man, shoving everything back into his bag, crumpling his wrapping paper and boxes in the process, will refuse the hand. Sara will relax further when the bus driver doesn't insist on shaking, but simply boards everyone else rapidly and quietly. As the man passes, Sara will think that he could die as easily as anyone if the bus blows up. But looking at his face, the way he clutches the largest of his once proudly packed boxes which wouldn't fit back in his pack, she will wonder to what degree death matters for him, or for that matter, for herself. Perhaps there is some kinship between them. And then the man will have squeezed past and gone towards the very back of the bus and the remainder of the passengers will have successfully struggled to insinuate themselves into the already overfilled vehicle. Turning back around, Sara will find herself inches from another man's waist. She will look up and see a lumpy military coat, whose sleeves are too long, buttoned all the way to his collar. He will be in his early twenties, black swirls of hair covering the backs of his hands. On the crest of an adrenaline-wave, Sara will see the truth in the trough below: this is the man, the bus driver searched the wrong guy, this is the one. Free fall rush of blood.

She will clutch at the insight she's just gained from the poor humbled man behind her. But hope will elude her. She will think, this is how it happens—and—this is the last thing I'll ever see. The bus will grind away from the curb before Sara can act, get off. And it will not blow up right away. Sara will remain staring at the waist of this man as the swaying of the accordion connected back section bounces her around. No, the man won't detonate right away. He'll begin fiddling with what must be a watch under his left sleeve, taking his arm partway down from the hanging metal strap to reach and twist something in between bus jerks that force him to grab on or fall over. Screaming panic will yo-yo in Sara's esophagus, bile searing her vocal cords. The watch, or wristband, or whatever, must be the detonator. But he will fiddle with it several more times and no explosion. Instead, she will realize that he knows she's staring; she won't be able to stop. Perhaps he's supposed to detonate at a specific time, and that's why he keeps looking at his watch.

No one has ever blown up on a bus that Sara's ridden. This man will not blow up either. But it will become increasingly difficult to believe that

anything else could happen. And given their proximity, if he does blow, Sara will not survive. She will find herself guiltily wishing one, or several, of the yeshiva girls would work their way between herself and the man. She will want to get up and reseal herself elsewhere, but will be incapable of doing so, certain that the man will realize her suspicions, and be deeply embarrassed if not confrontational and outraged—presuming he's not a bomber (of course he's not a bomber). Even if other passengers came between them wouldn't their exploded bodies penetrate Sara? She will collect a whole new array, a second coat, of shrapnel scars, her body torn by bodies, bone punctured by bone. (I have often wondered if some part of the woman who killed my family still resides in me, if the part of my heart that has a harder time with faith can be directly and proportionally attributed to the biological taint of that fiend).

Sara will will herself to calm down, close her eyes; clearly the man will not blow up! If he was going to kill everybody he would have done so already. Bombers don't take quick tours of the city before completing their missions. And still she will not be able to slow her heart rate, nor to fight her nausea. At any moment, she will scream. The bus will shake under the impact of brakes, startling Sara (if one could be any further startled, any more keyed up). It's just the brakes, she will reassure herself. The man will move as if to get off. Fixated, Sara will not move at all. It will occur to her that perhaps she's already dead, the man's already exploded and all this an imagined continuation of life instantly dreamt between impact and death.

The doors will close with a pneumatic exhalation, reminding her that people breathe, both in and out. And yet impossibly she will have continued to hold her breath. The man will not get off. He will pull on his watch again, shift from foot to foot. Now, even more disturbingly, he will begin to cradle and shift the odd shapes beneath his jacket pockets. It must be a bomb belt under there. It has to be. For whatever reason he will not have detonated it yet, but he will, surely he will, surely he must. Sara will be aghast that she elected to remain on the bus even another stop. The next stop is further, on the side of a highway that wraps around a hill. Why did she ever take the express bus when there are so few opportunities to escape?

Her body will momentarily relent. Adrenaline production will decelerate, hormones will course back to their uptakes. She breathes in and out. The man doesn't even really look Palestinian, really. So he's got some stuff in his pockets. Whatever. Life moves on. Certainly, she will not be able to afford to live with this level of mania. She will not survive if every man in a bulky jacket frightens her. Breathe in; breathe out. What's this? The man is sweating. He will wipe his face with his sleeve and then continue to nervously

feel out the strange, hard edged shapes beneath his jacket with his forearms. He will twist the band of his watch back and forth on his wrist, never exposing enough for Sara to discern wiring in his sleeve's shadows. There will be no question in Sara's mind, the man's a bomber. That he won't have exploded yet will only prove that his device is somewhat faulty. (It's bound to happen, a faulty device, from time to time). Or perhaps fear will stall him, some lingering doubt temporarily staying his immolation (that's also bound to happen, but likely won't last). He will reach into his pocket and Sara will know that his hands are feeling out the connections, preparing to manually trigger his mass-immolation. Just then the bus will come to its highway-side stop. Sara will desperately push her way out to save her life. As soon as her feet will land on pavement—in the middle of nowhere basically, the wall separating Arab East Jerusalem from the highway backs the stop she's gotten off at; a steep, undeveloped hillside rises across several lanes of traffic—she will feel her breath return to normal, her vision clear. She will become aware of her sweat-wet pits and clammy palms. The bus will pull away with a grudging grind of gears and a diesel fart.

Not a hundred yards away it will explode spectacularly, first throwing Sara backwards and then sucking her into the resulting vacuum, a rain of hot fragments lightly precipitating on her trembling, prostrate body. A piece of metal will clatter out of the sky in the distance, ringing a ragged death toll.

No it won't. The bus will pull away safely, and vanish down the highway, leaving Sara stranded. Another bus will come in half an hour. Unhappily, she will face the necessity of boarding it. She will realize that she's just left a bus that did not explode slip out of her grasp, and now must take the same chances all over with another one. In fact, her actions will have increased her chance of riding with a bomber because she will now take two buses instead of one. She will refuse to let herself cry. At least, standing outside waiting for the new bus will be more pleasant than sitting cramped between all those girls. But clearly, that man was never a bomber. He probably was a Jew, for God's sake.

Fuck, I just realized that I got my, hmm. Just write it, Sarah: I got my period. You're such a prude. It's a period, everyone gets them. (Though they probably don't write about them in their journals, not in real time, not at twenty-five).

—Later—

Despite double-bagging everything and putting it in the bear canister for trash, I worry that I still smell like blood. Yes, it's an irrational fear.

I've been pretty irregular to begin with and wondered if taking this trip, the exercise, mild calorie deficiency, wouldn't have stopped my cycle. It came close. The flow is awfully light but bears have an amazingly keen sense of smell. I've heard recommendations against campers having sex in their tents in the lower forty-eight (which never concerned me). And I've read accounts of bears sniffing out wrapped snickers bars in tents. All this invokes the fear that some bear will pick up the faint trace of my blood and come after it. I really thought my period would stop altogether on this trip, apparently not.

My trainer suggested going on the pill to suppress everything altogether. She said it would be more convenient; I figured she thought I would have sex with someone. I wish I had gone on the pill; I don't want this here, now. Even if I wasn't susceptible to the fearful suggestion that my body has secretly sought to contact predatory bears, I would not want to deal with double-bagged used pads, cleanup, hygiene. Either way, the obscuring fog that smothered my fears in a bliss of unknowing, now threatens me. I imagine those animals, long competent at olfactory navigation, even now establishing a siege just yards from my tent site. And I can't know. You can never know anything, it turns out. Faith. Faith, faith, faith, faith, faith.

But what good is faith when its primary purpose is to force one to accept the unintelligible, undecipherable twists of worldly activity as belonging to some plot beyond comprehension? What good is a faith that says everything happens for a reason when what happens is so damning? Am I to believe that my parents deserved to die while visiting their daughter in the midst of her attempt to be more religious? How can a faith like that prevent a bear from tracking down the infinitesimal scent of blood I leave behind and mauling me? This faith only tells me that I deserve it. (And if I keep on like this, I will deserve it). But, I want a faith that reassures me that evil will not happen. I want to face fear and say, "Sarah, nothing bad will happen because your God is watching out for you." Of course Hashem spoke to Adam and Eve, displayed his presence beyond all questioning—without evil, without crushed hope, without the bodies of loved ones to bury, without fear of death, why would one need to assume a god? But we are cast out of paradise. This is no paradise. And I must believe in God to stomach this rancid, fear-wracked, prolonged suffering. (It's bad enough that faith doesn't prevent evil; to think that evil happened outside a divine plan is unbearable). I want a bear to leap out of the woods and crush my head, once and for all; I pray that it doesn't happen.

There's nothing to do but go back to my future which pulls me forward. But even there, what happens?

Sure, the bus will come in half an hour, maybe a little later, a bit off

schedule, to pick up Sara alongside the highway. Its bright headlights will remind her of dusk's quick passing, of the possibility of sniper fire over the wall she stands against, homemade mortars even. She'll walk up to the bus and look up at the driver, take out her ten ride pass for him to punch. But then with her left foot on the first step, she will apologize, turn back. "But this is the only bus line that stops here, lady." No, it's the wrong bus. "Suit yourself." And he will close the door, the kneeling bus rising. Through the door panes, Sara will see the bus driver looking into traffic, and turning, hand over hand, the big flat wheel in front of him with the steady constancy of a fisherman resignedly rowing his dinghy out before dawn. Like a lantern light fading, the bus will slip away into darkness. There will be no point in hoping to board the next bus, in another half hour (or hour, depending on the schedule's vagaries). Turning defeat over defeat, with great difficulty, Sara will punch Udi's number into her cell phone.

"Can you come for me?"

"Of course. Where are you?"

"A bus stop on the highway"

"Which line? I'll just ride over to you."

"Come for me in a car."

Udi, thrilled at the invitation, its implicit pardon of his prior indiscretion, will not question her request. He will listen carefully to her directions, and promise to be there in less than twenty minutes.

Sure enough, twenty minutes later to the dot, Udi will arrive in Noah's Fiat. Sara will open the passenger door and see a bouquet of lavender, bluebells and irises in the seat.

"Going to visit someone after you drop me off?"

"What gave it away?"

"You've got these flowers on the seat. Shall I put them in the back or hold them in my lap?"

"If you don't mind holding them—"

"Then it's the least I can do since you came out here to pick me up."

"Well thank you. Do you think she'll like them?"

"They're very nice."

"Smell them."

"I can smell the lavender already."

"Does it remind you of the artic?"

"Being afraid reminds me of the artic."

"You're afraid to ride the bus."

Is that, then, where it all ends up? I struggle through my fears out here—assuming I do survive being icebound in the fog while bleeding like

near-carrion—only to go home to Jerusalem and find myself too PTSD to ride a city bus? Look at me. I stink. I'm cold. I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere, at the top of the world, in a pea soup fog, afraid to go more than five meters from my tent for fear of getting lost.

I want my parents.

I'm in over my head,

I can, will, do this.

Do what? There will be no rowing today, nor tomorrow, nor likely the day after that. My father's kayak, which has brought me so far, no longer can help me. I'm stranded. I need Udi to get me now, not later in some future life. But I must break free, because there is a future life, because I must have that peace.

Sara will get into his car and they will drive to her apartment. Once in Bait viGan, Udi will circle the block until he finds an overnight parking spot. Sara won't stop him. They will get out of the car together and Udi will drape her in his heavy coat, brushing his arm across the back of her shoulders. Sara won't stop that either. When she neglects to take the flowers, Udi will hand them to her and without discussion, they will walk between the long planters lining her building's open air lobby to its elevator bank, ride up, walk down Sara's hallway, and into her apartment. This will not be the first time Udi's come up to Sara's place. But unlike last time, they will close the door, despite the religious, legal connotations.

At the dining room table, a Long Island relic, Udi will retrieve his coat from her back like a matador snapping his cape, and fold it over the back of the chair at the head of the table before seating himself in it. Sara will sit next to him, her clasped hands on the table in front of her.

"I messed up, Udi."

"Good days and bad days, Sara. That's the end of it."

"Why don't you exploit this opportunity to say how much we're alike and how you were right at the café and everything else."

"Would you want that?"

"As much as I imagine myself here, I imagine myself as a suicide bomber wandering from bus to bus, searching for myself before exploding."

Udi will look at Sara, at me, his handsome soldier's features ill-equipped to express what he will feel: confusion, repulsion.

"You *imagine* yourself?"

"I imagine myself as a Palestinian double of me. An uncertain woman bundled in layers—clothing, bomb, clothing—wandering between buses, unsure of when to explode, unsure of why, but knowing that she must, knowing it will be a relief. And what I know about this person, who is me, and who

I imagine, but that she does not know about herself, is that she's waiting to find me on one of those buses. One day, as she wanders aimlessly from potentially caustic moment to moment, she'll see a young woman with facial scarification dressed in long clothing who looks like herself. Mimicking me, she'll trace the edge of her left ear, discovering for the first time that it is tattered like mine. I won't ask how she came to such an identical injury and she won't speak to me either. Maybe we'll try and flee from each other. I don't know. What is sure is that when that moment comes she will detonate, and the two of us will both be gone. In the morgue, they will accidentally mix our bodies and so the final death count will only tally half of me, and will accidentally tally half of a suicide bomber whose death Israel would not officially choose to acknowledge. Our burials will be similarly mixed—an arm of hers attached to remnants of my torso. Perhaps my head will end up wherever they put the bombers' bodies—”

“They cremate the bodies.”

“How do you know?”

“It's common knowledge. They hope that denying proper burial will act as a deterrent.”

“It doesn't seem to be working.”

“No, not particularly.”

“I imagine her unable to think properly, vaguely afraid, some asinine phrase circling through her head—a song lyric, or maybe an instruction. She forgets things and then remembers them, panics that she's forgotten them. All the while, wondering when the right moment will be, hating her hesitation, trying to focus. She's a grenade with its arm wedged against the side of a munitions box and its pin pulled out, all in the back of a pickup truck with a shot suspension, racing down a pocked dirt road, waiting for the right bump to set the whole thing off. And then she remembers, in a hot flash, someone telling her, she's not sure who, that if she focuses on killing a particular person, makes herself into a bullet against that one individual, then it will be easy.”

“And that's when you see each other?”

“That's when we see each other.”

Udi will studiously remove Sara's left hand from her right, gently prying the fingers loose, as if he were untangling a knot or defusing a bomb. The hand free, and Sara looking away, Udi will rub her palm gently with his fingertips, then slowly work his way up, massaging her wrist with his thumbs. Sara will fidget with her free arm, look away from Udi, threaten to break away from him altogether, from this clear violation of *shomrei negiah*. The silence of her apartment, the cold emptiness of all her things will weigh

on her. She will turn to him, her mouth full of silent words, a gasping fish mouth, a screaming beached whale. Now tracing gentle circles along her forearms, Udi will cock his head from side to side, falsely inquisitive, miming the mute to speech. Her free hand will slap down on the table like a hull breaching a wave, a fat thwack stinging her fingertips, her wrist. And meanwhile, the soporific fondling of her arm will continue, repulsive and welcome, a dream-drug whose incumbent inoculation she fights.

“What, Sara?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Tell me.”

“Just stop it.”

She will pull her arm away from him, ghost tingles mesmerizing its flesh, betraying her will. His hangdog face and submissive, sympathetic willingness will drive her to a near internal fury and a strong desire to grab his shadowed cheeks in both hands and kiss him, hard, her nails biting into his skin, leaving marks, her teeth driving against his lips, mashing them, making them swell purple, like a plum’s skin. She will want to hit him.

“I’m afraid, Udi. I’m afraid.”

“I know, Sara.”

“I’m afraid because there’s this girl in the Arctic and the ice has closed in around her and she’s trapped in her tent and she can’t move and winter is coming. I’m afraid that the weather won’t change again and she’ll be stranded, slowly running out of food, unable to move, nowhere to go. I’m afraid that she will die there by herself in the cold. I’m afraid that none of this will happen.”

“It’s all right, Sara. You’ve made it. You got out of the Arctic. You’re here.”

“You don’t understand, Udi. I’m afraid that the ice will trap me, that I won’t escape, that I’ll die there.”

“Be here, Sara.”

“I want to be.”

“Be with me.”

“I’m trying to live so that I can be with you.”

“You are with me so live.”

“You can’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“You can’t because it would be impossible for you to understand that all this life only exists as long as I experience it. That if I die, you die with me, that my doppelganger is the destroyer of all I would live for, not just my life itself, because my life creates all of it. You can’t possibly see that I am

icebound and fogbound for the third day in a row, only mostly recovered from a massive hangover begotten by a bottle of near-mythic whiskey that's still half-full, fully potent. Udi, I can drink the rest of that bottle and walk out onto the ice in my underwear and in an hour it'll all be over—but I want to be with you. I want to live for you. I want to survive and believe that you can really love me.”

“Sara, I do love you.”

“But I'm trapped by the ice.”

“You don't have to be.”

Udi will recapture her hands, both of them this time. Panic will share space on his face with patronizing sympathy, his lustful over-caring.

“You don't understand, Udi. I am in a tent, in the Canadian Arctic, and I don't know that I'll make it.”

“Of course you will. You told me once about being trapped by ice on your trip. And look at you now, you're here. You broke free.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Let me try to remember.”

Udi will guide Sara by her two hands, up from her seat and across to his lap. Willingly, slowly, like a forgiven child, she will sit side-saddle across his legs, demurely.

“Tell me, Udi.”

He will nuzzle her good ear, inhale her hair, slowly, casually encircle her waist.

“The ice broke free.”

“How?”

“The wind came, blew the fog out, and sent the ice to sea. The sun returned and conditions improved. You got back in your boat and you rowed. Favorable conditions allowed you to make up for lost time. You were fine.”

“Tell me again.”

After furtively glancing at the hands Sara's placed on his shoulders, Udi will resume.

“Strong winds came from the south in the night and blew the ice out to sea. In the morning, the sun burnt through what was left of the—”

Sara will stop nibbling on Udi's earlobe and murmur, “Keep telling me.”

“The sun burnt off what was left of the fog and you quickly broke down your camp. You repacked your kayak and launched it into light, following seas. You easily breached the surf and made good time heading eastward. The weather held and soon you were out of danger.”

Sara will have brought her left hand down Udi's side, feeling his hard

chest muscles, ribs, ease into the soft side of his stomach. Her right hand will have strayed down his back, her mouth now on his neck, biting and kissing, tasting almond aftershave and sweat. Udi will move his head to kiss her, briefly his lips meet hers. She will want to press into him, to cry, to shove her tongue into his mouth, to bite, to wail. Instead, she will take her hand out of his lap, grab his chin and turn his head away from her.

“Tell me again how the ice broke, how I lived.”

“One night, after several days spent pacing your campsite, your tent whipped in the wind. Startled from sleep, still in a dream-daze, you imagined you heard the fire-roar of wind in trees, the creaking of winter-bare branches in a storm. You braced yourself for danger but slipped back out of consciousness.”

Sara will lick the underside of Udi’s chin, his nascent stubble abrading her tongue; his jaw will press her jaw down as he whispers. Her hand will find his shirt buttons and expertly, singly undo them. He will move a hand onto her thighs, okay. But when he will reactivate it, begin to search her out, she will slap him; he must not be distracted, will not be.

“You woke early, the tent calm now, sunlight glowing against its yellow walls. Occasional gusts still whipped by, rippling the fabric in waves like a string of prayer flags on a mountain. Still inside your sleeping bag, you pulled on the mid-layer of insulation that you slept with at your feet: fleece coveralls, wool socks, hat, fleece sweater. God that feels good, Sara.”

“Don’t interrupt.”

“You pulled on your neoprene booties and stepped out of the tent shivering, immediately blinking in a strong sun barely five degrees over the mountains. Eyes shaded, half-crouching, you turned towards the ocean.”

His shirt completely open, Sara will kiss across Udi’s now-exposed chest, her fingers tangling in the gray and black hair on his stomach, her right hand will claw at the nape of his neck. Her tongue will find one of his nipples inside an eddy of black hair; she’ll pull it into her mouth, suck, then bite hard, making him yelp.

“The ocean was clear, pancakes of ice still littered the shore above the high tide line, but the water was open as far out as you could see. You hurried back to your campsite and cooked a quick breakfast of oatmeal and tea over your Whisperlite stove, then hurriedly stashed your gear back in your boat, downing a meat-stick while you dismantled your tent.”

Sara will turn, straddling Udi, and push his shirt off of his shoulders, feeling down his arms’ curves. Her tongue will dally in the cleft of his neck, run rings along the seam of his chest. With the backs of her nails, she’ll scrape his skin in long, needy strokes.

“With the tent fastened, you dragged your craft out into the surf, half-running. After days of inactivity, you elected not to use your sail, but row instead. You wanted to feel strength in your arms, muscle ache, blood pumping. You waited as a receding wave sucked the water from under your boat, pulled it slightly further out, got in, and braced yourself. A swell broke over your bow, pouring off the sides before reaching you and the cockpit. Suddenly buoyant, you began to row hard, the wave pulled you north. And then you’d broken free of the surf, were safely out over deep water. Leaning right, you pulled the boat around east, and set off.”

Scared and eager, Sara will look down at the tab of Udi’s belt she’s just pulled out of one half of its buckle. He will suck his gut in as she pulls the belt backwards to lift out the buckle’s tongue. And then it will be free, flow easily apart. She will notice a fresh crease in the black leather across the hole she’s unfastened and older, deeper creases further towards the tip. Next she will open the button of his trousers, only to find that an internal clasp keeps them closed as well.

“Beneath you, the water was brown with silt runoff, but further out, it turned an oily sunset blue. Exuberant, you rowed hard, warmth and pain mixing across your back and along the tops of your shoulders. For the first time in weeks, you reveled in your surroundings. White mountains sparkled in a wall of barren, articulated mass to your left, rising behind a landscape covered with snow. Over them, a blinding orange sun hung like an oversized set piece, disproportionately present. In front of you, ocean bent away towards the thin line of island shores far distant. You wondered if the silt washing around you wasn’t actually McKenzie runoff and not a local phenomenon of the melting snow at all. Cold air cycled through your lungs, and you leaned further into your task, sure, certain, and free.”

His pants undone, Sara will slowly slip her hands around Udi’s waist. She will draw them over the sides of his butt, feel his firm, warm haunches inside her palms, his boxers silky, worn cotton secreting the backs of her fingers, palms, wrists. As she draws her hands up over his thighs, in towards his crotch, she will feel his breath shorten, his legs tense, and his hands jerk, desperate to move, confined by her will.

“Despite your urge to rush forward, your training overtook you, forced you to adopt a steady, sustainable rhythm, a commitment to the long haul ahead. Though you hungered for the end of your journey, wished to row frantically for days on end without food, without sleep, fully exploiting your twenty-two hours of light, and perhaps the hours of dark as well, you slowed, realized your goal was at hand, controlled yourself. Midday, you took a break; stopped rowing, and ate granola bars while drifting, slowing, holding your position with your rudder.”

Sara will slip a hand behind the small of Udi's back and pull herself forward, hiking her skirt up in the process. Pressing her body against his, her breasts into his chest, her pelvic bone into the top of his crotch, she will moan into his neck, grind down. He will start to stop; then he will resume in a broken, fast-paced whisper as she brushes the bottom lip of her open mouth along the ridge of jaw below his ear, her eyes slitted.

"You finished your lunch. You started rowing again. The ocean was calmer than it had been for most of your trip. Everything worked well. You'd found your groove at last. The cold air and the sun conspired to keep your body temperature perfect. For the first time you realized you'd miss the arctic after you left."

I can't do this. Not yet. It's too early. It's not me.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

It would never happen; I can't pretend that it would ever happen.

"Sara, are you okay?"

Sara will pull herself off of Udi, pushing her skirt down with her hands, and then jam her hands into her hair. Her damp panties cooling around her crotch will smack her, make her shiver. She will look over at Udi's disarray—open shirt, open pants, erection fading beneath his boxers, which are damp, damp with her—and she will want to scream or vomit or hurt herself. Udi will quickly stand up and turn away from her as he buttons himself up and tucks himself in.

"I'm sorry, Udi, this isn't right; it isn't me."

"Don't play with me, Sara."

"I shouldn't have gotten you all worked up."

"This is cruel. You didn't have to do any of this. I would have been happy to just hold you."

"I'm orthodox. I want to believe. I want to observe. I want to be rescued by Hashem."

"This isn't right, Sara, to treat someone this way."

For one thing, I have my period. If I keep on, I'll attract bears.

"Why didn't you say it was your period?"

Udi will turn back towards her, smoothing the front of his shirt. Facing him, Sara will notice they've adopted identical poses, hands flat against their waists, heads tilted forward, legs slightly more than shoulder width apart—ready stances, action stances, the soldier and the adventurer preparing to grapple with—

"I wouldn't have even if it wasn't."

"What bears?" Udi will gesture broadly with one hand, indicate the whole of the apartment. "What bears are you afraid of, Sara?"

“You can’t understand Udi. You have to stop being rational, stop questioning, and just trust me. Trust me.”

“Trust you that there are bears?”

“There are bears behind the fog, still hungry, still searching for food—urgently searching for food, fattening up before hibernating.” Udi will blink, and in his face’s softened expression, Sara will see an entirely new wariness, the very caution she’s feared to find in him since the very beginning: pussyfooted tenderness towards damaged goods. “Don’t look around this apartment like I’m crazy. It’s a mirage. All of it is a projection of my fantasy, Udi. But the real truth is that I’m lying in a tent, writing in my diary, hoping that the storm breaks so I can proceed. And I have my period. And I’m afraid that if—and with my period—and—well—that everything united the smell—blood—will draw bears.”

He will sit back down in the same chair, sigh, lift his hands and then drop them, sigh. “You know, Sara —“

“What, Udi?”

“Well it’s just that—“

“What, Udi? Just that what?”

“Fucking hell. If you’re fantasizing everything. Then why can’t you fantasize that we have sex? Why do you have a fantasy all twisted up and convoluted? If this is a fantasy, then why do I have free will?”

Sara will sit down as well, somewhat cowed.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?”

“Any of it. I don’t know the answers to any of it.” She’ll reach across to him, gingerly make for his hand, but he’ll move it out of reach, into his lap.

“I’m sorry, Udi.” He’ll begin to crack; she’ll see it in the softening of his lips, the droop of his shoulders. “Udi, I do love you.”

“Maybe I should go home, Sara.”

“Only if you want to.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“I don’t know.”

Udi will stand up, pull on his coat, and walk over to Sara’s chair. He’ll quickly cup her chin and kiss her forehead. “Udi—” But he will continue on to the door, and she won’t stop him.

And so there I am, alone. Even in my future, I end up by myself, sitting in my apartment, lonely, afraid. But there is a future beyond that moment, Sarah. It may well happen that Udi will return, that time will elapse and he and Sara will marry. In time, Jerusalem will cease to be a battlefield. Your fear will fade.

Maybe. But, now it seems likely that I will die here, in my tent, terrified of the deepened gloom outside.

Elohim yechananu viyivrachanu, yaayr panav eetanu, selah.

God will favor us, and bless us, he will turn his face to us, Selah

He will make the path clear to the world, every people will cry unto him.

He will be known to the nations, our God, known to every nation.

He will be rejoiced and feared in all other countries because he will cause them to judge honestly towards the path.

This is what I remember from a letter my father sent me:

Patchwork cement plugs fill in for trees razed to make way for rescue trucks; orange checks cover the back doors of buildings, dated by search completion; the Deutsche Bank building wears pin-striped black over its broken face, and only in these tragic alleys can I capture and live in my fear. Paddling out into the Atlantic, mild water waving off into rounded blue, sine, cosine, sine, sine, cosine, sine—infinity, for me, means no deity, but a mathematical summation of emptiness; I scrambled for shore, heartbeat racing, scared, terrified. I'm only all right where I can cry, where I can see damage, scars, rent fabric and ashes.