

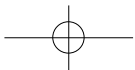
JACOB PAUL

From *A Song of Ilan*

A Day

Standing on a small stone, Ilan flattens his palm against the cliff rising above the carriage road. Horizontal striations create roofs and ledges. From the smaller ledges, gnarled bonsai cypresses sprout. Full trees rise out of the largest. Behind him, sitting on a low stone wall that separates the carriage road from a steep wooded hillside stretching down to the Hudson River's plains, his wife rifles through her pack, a rustling that harmonizes with that of fallen leaves caught in the wind. Once there was a before, he thinks. A before in which this cliff was made of grey rock that hewn to blocks could build the Wailing Wall. Once there was a before; and the words are abstract. He tilts his head as if to examine the eighty-foot climb above. The words are sad in the abstract. The concrete events—a shooting in Tel Aviv; an escape to New York City; leaving the *derech*, the path of righteousness—are, well, concrete. Wailing Wall, he thinks. As at that famous relic, tufts of vegetation fracture the cliff's conglomerate rock. I have a nostalgia for a period in which I had a nostalgia, he mouths. The pain he feels is not for the passion with which he once prayed at the last standing wall of the old temple in Jerusalem, but for the young man walking whole Manhattan neighborhoods in a summer evening. It's for his wonder at junk stores on Mulberry spiked with memories of the Old City's Shuk, as if lower Manhattan's streets were equal exchange for stone alleyways two millennia old, a few stores selling knockoff watches and cheap baseball hats as colorful as a place where bins of fish heads divided crates of fresh eggs from street cobblers.

He looks over at the blue-helmeted woman who's begun scaling Horseman. She moves quickly, placing her hands and feet precisely in seams and on small protrusions. He tilts his head back farther still to follow her ever-higher ascent and suddenly he loses his balance, steps backwards to stay standing. He wonders if he isn't maybe too . . . too sick? Too sick to climb? No. Too something, what something? Scared? Too something, too drawn to the twenty-three-year-old wandering the windswept concrete fissures of lower Manhattan, chilly in his first real suit, desperate for the warmth of a bar, of a strange woman's smile. Too whatever, scared, yes, but off-balance really. Too off-balance to climb the "hard short thing next to Horseman" his wife mentioned over their omelets' darkening remains. Blue-helmet told him its name, Apoplexy. But knowing what to call the collection of minute ledges and tiny cracks that constitute a route up this section of the cliff doesn't make him feel much better about leaving the ground. He craves a cold or the flu, an emergency call from work or a car accident on the S-curves below, a sudden intervention and detention by Homeland Security.



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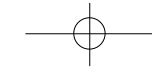
Fuck it. Today is another day that Yedit has chosen to spend with him. If he can string enough of these together. . . . If they can stay together through enough of these days there will again be a time in which Yedit is not, is not—he doesn't dare say it. There will be a time in which Ilan will feel comfortable even when he isn't wearing the black vest. There will be a time in which his wife's performance voice in city bookstores doesn't evoke a bullet wound in a young woman's chest, just inches above unexploded coils of nails and bolts and dynamite, an exo-viscera, a missed immolation.

There will be a time. Sure there will. But that time seems even more abstract than the words that sadden him. That time is like the cab ride home you've promised to yourself for right after you finish the drink you just ordered.

Blue-helmet moves effortlessly. Horseman is not a particularly difficult climb: a 5. 5, first climbed just before America entered the Great War, by the man who till then held the record for reaching the highest point on K2. And that guy climbed Horseman in mountaineering boots with nothing but a hemp rope lashed around his waist, hammering homemade pitons into the rock for protection as he went. But Horseman is long, and it's exposed, and though Ilan's climbed it numerous times, his attitude towards it has been infected by his fear of Apoplexy.

There has always been fear. He and Louis, his first climbing partner, would travel to genuinely dangerous places. During slivers of sobriety they would scale ugly mountains in adverse conditions. Blue-helmet, by contrast, neither conquers nor hides from fear. She just isn't afraid. Ilan no longer craves the fear but can't shake it either. Louis? Louis called a month ago to say that he was flying to Jackson Hole and driving to the Wind River Range. Early-season storms had finally made the k-cracks on Pingora worth climbing. Louis returned with tales of avalanches crossing the backpacking trail into the Cirque of the Towers, tales of packing an ice axe up five pitches of granite because the scramble above them had become a snow climb. Yedit, Ilan's wife and current climbing partner, isn't afraid either. Sometimes Louis' climbs appeal to her and sometimes they don't. But Ilan, Ilan can't tell the difference between ambitious and foolish because all climbs scare the shit out of him.

Yedit fidgets. Pieces of climbing gear, cams and hexes, clank and clash like a Nepalese pilgrimage, like men in red robes banging cymbals together to mark mountain progress. Gold sashes slung over their shoulders like the yellow webbed sling Blue-helmet doesn't bother to take off of her own shoulder; blue-helmet doesn't hitch the tree that offers her first point of protection. Instead, she continues on to a stable stance at the base of a corner formed by the jutting cliff roof. Ilan knows Yedit wants him to stop watching Blue-helmet. Gear up and get started on this Apoplexy thing. Blue hel-



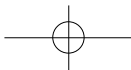
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met's never stopped a war, Ilan thinks, but is he any more willing to fight? No. That's why he's here, not Tel Aviv. And is the color of this woman's climbing helmet in any way a remonstrance to the elegant efficiency with which she places a cam in the rock, then clips the rope to its dangling carabiner in a motion that propels her farther upwards still? The clanking and clashing softens to clinks and clacks, tricams and carabiners; just like that, his wife's almost ready.

And the breakfast nook, through whose sunroom walls Ilan and Yedit watched deer emerge from their property-line woods and stalk the frost that marched across their lawn, uncut since the height of the frisbee season, condemns him. And the thought of condemnation evokes a hint of overcoat, a hint of beach and asphalt, a hint of a hint he refuses to see. And that refusal, blended with the crick in his neck from watching Blue-helmet's tensed brown calf protrude from green Prana capris, brings black spots into his vision. Despite himself, those spots puddle into images: his major in the Israeli Defense Forces standing on one side of him, a woman colonel on the other, facing a battery of news cameras; the cover of his wife's book jacket, on which the English, *Psalms*, in lavender, runs into the Hebrew, *Tehillim*, in burgundy coming from the right. Beneath the text a painting of Dovid with his knee in the small of Saul's back, Dovid holding Saul's head by his hair, a *shochet's* knife across his neck. In a fainter, more distant spot, Louis, Ilan's climbing mentor, passes a bottle of Armagnac to him as they cross an Alaskan glacier in the fog. But the spots quickly disappear, and for some reason, Ilan thinks of an old joke his father used to tell about a man who prays to Hashem that he might win "a small lottery, a *bisl gelt*." The rock ruptures the joke. An upset stomach turns Ilan's thoughts the color of a jet's exhaust, and he remembers the eager clapping and singing when the El Al jet landed at Ben Gurion, himself six months out of high school, just in time to do his time in the army.

Ilan walks backwards across the gravel carriage road that runs along the base of the climbs. He sequences the climb's moves, miming hand positions. It's useless. He's too self-conscious. The paint stains on his wife's sweat-pants keep catching his attention. She's got a vagina under there, he thinks, and wants to touch—better to watch the blue-helmet climb, who from this angle is visible as she passes the collection of webbing and pitons that marks Horseman's midpoint.

Blue-helmet continues up the cliff, placing the occasional cam, clipping it to the rope on her left side, effortless. Still, Ilan inhales a little too quickly each time she swings for a hold or cuts out with her feet. Tell Yedit that you're not climbing then. You'll go home, make a pot of lavender Earl Gray. You'll sprawl on the pile of cushions and furs set in the living-room bay window's recess. And Yedit, she'll put her head on your chest, your



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bodies a sickle, and read from the Song of Songs. In fact, you can read for the male speaker, she for the female. Except that Yedit's reimagining the piece with a single speaker who shifts gender and focus. So what. They'll read it in Hebrew. Forget the English. Make a fire. Except that he can think in Modern Hebrew but has to translate Biblical Hebrew into English. Think about climbing, asshole; and thinking about climbing rather than actually climbing is also a dodge.

"She chooses where she'll put gear before she gets there," Ilan says.

"She's probably memorized the climb."

"Perhaps."

"Are you climbing Apoplexy or should we keep walking?"

Ilan looks again. He can clip a pin about twenty feet up, and then about that high again there's a pocket where he might be able to stuff a pink tri-cam—a haphazard piece at best, hardly worth the time it would take to place. In other words, for the first twenty feet, a fall means hitting the ground; and then, after ten feet of relative security, the following ten feet also hold the possibility of a ground fall—if the pin's even any good. If not, one could consider the first forty feet absolutely unprotected. From there, another ten feet of challenging climbing brings one to a good cam placement and the second crux, a funky set of roofoy moves, after which the climb is at least protectable. Blue-helmet's partner looks over at them and smiles. Her leader has led around the traverse and is now out of sight, around the corner and onto the face above the large ceiling formed by the striation.

"That's a really fun route," says Blue-helmet's partner.

"I'd rather be warming up on Horseman."

His wife pays no attention to Ilan's banter with Blue-helmet's partner. She's pulling on her harness. Ilan sighs; he once downloaded an Iranian porno in the repressed hope that the star would somehow remind him of the Palestinian suicide bomber he shot in Tel Aviv. Maybe, a small voice had suggested, the Iranian's naked body will let you imagine the Palestinian's body. Instead, he now confuses the porn star's body with Yedit's; he tries to imagine her breasts and recalls thick Persian nipples. He looks up at the climb, looks over at his wife; Yedit's harnessed-up and flaking the rope out of her pack into a neat pile at the base of the face. Blue-helmet's partner smiles over at him and he smiles back. Perhaps it would be easier with her. Maybe she would have let him fuck her in the morning before they came out to climb. And that's the thing about asking for miracles; if Hashem's willing to grant them, why does He need to create their occasion? If Ilan needs God to explain away the necessity of killing a woman, then he also needs God to not require the killing in the first place. Shit, he just needs God to tell him that Yedit will stay.

Ilan looks at his hands. His nails are scuffed and scratched. I have a

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weird resumé, he thinks. I grew up orthodox Jewish to Israeli parents in Pittsburgh. I returned to serve my military time in Israel. I spent a year in southern Lebanon working with Christian militias. While off-duty I prevented a suicide bombing at a Tel Aviv café by shooting the bomber, a Palestinian woman about my own age, twenty, twenty-two. I returned to New York to go to college but dropped out after a year. I became a financial advisor specializing in commodities and made a small fortune. I traveled with Louis to Alaska for a month and put up difficult routes in the coastal range. I met a hotshot academic five years my junior, married her, and bought a farmhouse two centuries old. My wife published a translation of the Psalms that is a commercial success (bizarre as that sounds). I watched the World Trade Center collapse from my office window. It's quite the resumé and yet what the hell does it say about me? No, Ilan decides, it isn't what I've done, or even what's happened to me. It's the dreams I've lost. And he wonders now whether the dream he's losing isn't that of his lovely wife, Yedit.

You've begun to think in short dramatic soliloquies, Ilan notes. You're structuring your thoughts around these little phrases: "a once in which there was a before," "there will be time," "fear," "miracles," "it's quite a resumé," "the dreams he's lost."

And from a distance, the tufts of vegetation look less like greenery and more like scribbled prayers wedged in the chinks between stone blocks.

Prayers, asshole? Ilan thinks. What would you pray for, Hero-boy? That you weren't at the café? That the woman killed you? That you could've fucked her before you shot her? That your wife didn't translate her translation? And a softer voice whispers, would your prayer just be *tihiyeh: you will be*? Ilan inhales and *My soul left when he spoke*. The Song of Song's fifth book. Except that his wife has translated it as: *soul left, exited, departed, went-out, in his words*. No, Ilan mutely yells at his wife, your heart left when you wrote. And yet he stays to read what she writes, doesn't he? Hope in her hopelessness? My prayer, he acknowledges, would be that I could pray. I'm weak and repulsive, he thinks. Disgusting.

Ilan's failure to take action towards climbing has so frustrated him that he thinks he might actually be motivated. Blue-helmet is long out of sight and has apparently stopped moving. He tries to divine his next move in the soft lines cornering his wife's mouth: *Eyleh birechev vieyleh bisoosim; and us, in the name of the Lord our God we will be remembered*. The comfort of chariots; the strength of horses. *Vianachnu kamnu*. Sure, sure *we* rose up. Rose up and ran away. Killed and deserted. Shot dead your enemy and then left forever the country for which you killed.

"Diti, remember those kids in the park in Eureka?"

"Now he's nostalgic as well."

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“Stop being so hostile.”

“The kids with the dog with the eye.”

“And the little girl thought it was a cattle disease but it wasn’t.”

“Ilan, really, are we going to climb today? Should we just walk down to Jackie? Would you rather lead that?”

Jackie is four grades easier, the same difficulty as Horseman. Yes, Ilan would much rather lead that. And no, he can not bail on Apoplexy, though God only knows why.

“What was the name of that disease, Diti?”

Diti hands him the end of the rope; he’s unprepared. “I don’t remember. Here tie in.”

“You don’t remember?”

“What does it matter, Ilan? Tie in.”

Last night, with Yedit safely asleep, to bed early in anticipation of climbing, Ilan pattered down to her office with his black Donna Karan vest and a roll of masking tape. It wasn’t easy to find a night that he could make his own. Most usually she stayed up late wandering between her office, the bookcase-lined foyer, and the refrigerator. Her office contained almost nothing. A laptop centered a six-foot wide white-formica-topped table, itself in the center of the room, the kind of table that filled science labs when Ilan was in high school. A bookstand flanked either side of the laptop. One held *Shir haShirim*, the Hebrew edition of the Song of Songs; a Hebrew lexicology sat open in the other. A booklight clipped to each bookstand. All the wires ran through a hole Ilan had drilled in the table to an outlet in the floor. Aside from the table and her desk chair, a leather design thing Ilan bought her on their first anniversary, the room was devoid of furniture and wires. The walls white, the floors the same ancient oak that’s throughout the house. The uncurtained southeast-facing windows reflected black as he blinked in the overhead light. Careful not to disturb her bookstands, he spread open the vest on the table. He laid the first strip of masking tape, the stripe that holstered the explosive vials. Upstairs he heard rustling and froze. It subsided. A stair creaked and he froze again. The refrigerator clicked on. Ilan let out his breath and tore another strip of tape. A shorter piece that he laid across the first. Is this why he can’t climb? Because he was up all night? Because he’s too tired? He looked around Yedit’s office. Two pictures hung on otherwise bare walls. One photo showed her birth parents: young eager soldiers dressed in green fatigues, standing, appropriately enough, in front of an olive grove on a kibbutz somewhere. The other photo was of the American couple that adopted her after her parents were killed: an oddly soft and dour pair seated on a pink couch. He’d drunk his morning coffee on that couch more than once. He went back to his tape and his vest. Delicate work. Every line must be precise.

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“Can’t we just go back to Eureka?”

“You seriously want to take a road trip through Nevada?”

He thinks, I am desperately searching her face for the hint of a smile. And then he thinks, ‘desperately’ and ‘hint.’ He thinks, I will never rise to her, to her occasion.

“Just let me analyze the climb a bit. OK?”

Look at your wife, he commands himself, fumbling and fuming with his pack. Meet her eyes. She married him; clearly she’s chosen to be with him. Oh, Yedit, he thinks, when you go from this life, will that unknowable intelligence of yours be forever closed? Your attacks simply cultured statements? Or do you expect to find yourself facing the giant scale that Chasidic folklore tells of, your good deeds stacked on one golden pan, your evil on the other. Do you do what you do in hopes of that final chance to turn away from that scale and finally confront the god you’ve offended beyond forgiveness? They say that one’s *neshamah* instantly understand the complete truth of God’s plan at that moment. Will He simply send you back in a new form to try again? And if you are reincarnated, Yedit, will your parents again fall prey to a PLO shell fired out Lebanon? A pesky small voice suggests that Ilan would love his wife more fighting an actual god than simply attacking a culture in a world bleakly undivine. Asshole, he answers this voice of himself. That woman will leave me long before she leaves this life, and when she does, she’ll pack a few essentials, get into her Rav4 and leave no forwarding address. It was so much easier being twenty-three, showing off the negotiating skills he learned in the Shuk to Annette, stoked to date a blonde rich girl.

“Now or never, Ilan.”

“I’ll climb it. I’ll climb it.”

Pack finally off, he unbuckles the top-lid and loosens the drawstring securing the main compartment. Yedit touches the top of his head and he looks up at her. Bent over, he catches the line of her jaw, the silhouette of her nose blocking one apricot eye. She also would have shot the Palestinian woman, he thinks. Only she could have stayed in Tel Aviv.

Ilan extracts a purple Petzl harness, steps into its leg loops, and pulls it up until its waist belt sits over his hips, a few inches above the bottom hem of his sweater. He hauls on the straps on either side of the waist belt, tightening the harness, takes a deep breath, takes another deep breath, and tightens it some more. Of course, the danger is not of the harness coming off, but of the harness proving irrelevant because there are no cracks in the rock in which to place the gear that would catch the rope to catch the harness and in turn catch him. Nonetheless, he gives the straps an extra little yank. From above, a hollow voice yells, “Off belay.” Blue-helmet’s partner yells a thankyou up rock, and unclips the ropes from her belay device. Freed, they

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dance up the cliff as Blue-helmet pulls in slack.

Ilan begins transferring gear from the sling to his harness while Blue-helmet's partner puts on her climbing shoes. Pulling the trigger on his purple Camelot, he watches the smooth action with which the four lobes, eighth-inch-wide metal half-moons, two on either side of the trigger stem, pull back and then spring out. This is the joy of disassembling, oiling and reassembling a gun. Ilan no longer own a firearm, but spends hours on his couch, legs up on the coffee-table, flicking a Gerber knife open, observing its action, the work of the spring.

And then there's the precision of the masking-tape bomb silhouette. After 9/11, his office temporarily shoehorned into the midtown branch, daily deliveries of baked goods began arriving from vendors, other branches, clients—some from the midtown employees. Then one day an angel-food cake showed up, frosted white with the city's skyline in blue, the twin towers done up as American flags. The masking-tape boxes that run across the vest's black silk lining are meant to represent the parts of a homemade bomb—packets of drywalls anchors, vials of acetone peroxide, wiring. Instead they remind him of skyline, specifically, the skyline from the cake. He can't quite connect the two images, but he enjoys his mind's shuttling between them.

The two ropes tied to Blue-helmet's partner's harness come taut, and she begins the—on-belay? On belay. Climbing. Climb-on—duet with her partner. "Excuse me, do you know if there are bolts at the top of Apoplexy?"

"I think so."

And she's off. In the time it's taken Ilan to mentally prepare himself, Blue-helmet has scaled Horseman, built an anchor off the trees at its summit, and placed her partner on belay. Ilan loops a figure eight into the end of the rope that Yedit handed him. He could still make a last-ditch run to the porta-san. Tell his wife he has to shit again. Of course she would blame that on his having his first drink since they married last night. A glass of Louis' homemade wine. Louis brought the wine over to show off to Yedit. Ilan knew that, and so he drank a glass as well. Well, what promise was truly inviolate?

"Thanks. Could you wait until I put my shoes on?"

"Could you take any longer to do so?"

He didn't even taste the champagne that her editor brought over. That Saturday was nearly a year ago, when Joanne showed up at 9am with a bottle of Veuve Cliequot and a copy of the New York Times Book Review. It didn't matter what they wrote, she said, that an academic translation showed on their pages was "as rare as a peace accord that sticks." Since that review, since his wife and Joanne's morning champagne drunk, a quick check for the burgundy row of her book's spines has become a mandatory stop at every

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bookstore within proximity. The project had defined their courtship—he got them into the botanical gardens and beneath the cherry trees she read him her psalms, her wicked translations of the *Tehillim*. Since, they’ve become her occasion for spending time with strangers, drinking with academics and reviewers and writers, drinking with successes. Since then, her contours, dulled by intimacy, have sharpened. The way her skin curves across the top of her cheekbone. The way her dark lashes look as if she’s permanently wearing eyeliner. The way she holds her head back and slightly to the right, in the same fashion as her mother in the office photo, so that her black hair falls to one side and her neck seems to rise towards unseen lips.

Ilan closes his eyes and forces himself to breathe. *Mercies of the Lord, forever I will sing of you*. Ilan opens his eyes and forces himself to smile. He leans over and reaches into his bag for his shoes. Just when he thought things couldn’t get worse, the unmistakable sound of clanging hexes approaches, a mutant wind-chime, a breath of high altitude warfare. What could only be Louis himself stops a pace behind Ilan.

“Diti! *Mah Nishmah?* You making this old soldier solo Apoplexy to set a top rope for you?”

“You can only lead a horse to water.”

Ilan stands from tying his shoes, his spine’s audible cracking smothered by Louis’ loud laughter. And the blood rushing from his head makes him dizzy. As if there was ever any chance he would get out of leading this climb anyway. Louis plus Yedit is . . . well. When Ilan’s mother slipped away from his father’s deathbed to use the bathroom, Ilan’s father leaned over and grabbed Ilan’s sleeve. “I’m afraid,” whispered. “I’m too young.” Asshole, Ilan chides, nothing is that bad. Tonight he’ll make lamb chops in a wine and honey sauce. Yedit will smile while she eats, her fingertips still raw from climbing. He’ll tell her about the fear returning. She’ll leave her plate and straddle his lap, hold his face in her cupped palms.

“How’d you like my Hebrew?” Ilan asks.

“*Eevreetechah beseder; aval mah karah lipanechah?*” says Louis.

“Whoa! English, boy. You in America now; You speak English. Eengeleesh.”

Yedit scowls at Ilan.

“Right.”

“I got nothing. *Beseder* maybe,” says Louis.

“Just as well, buddy boy.”

“You are still on belay, Ilan,” says Yedit.

“And I still haven’t tied my shoes.”

“It’s nine-minus. Fuck the shoes,” says Louis.

“Nine-minus with no gear.

“If you can lead a 10a you can solo nine-minus.”

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“Fuck off?”

Yedit, rolling her eyes, scowling, threatens to translate what Ilan said about Louis’ face if Ilan doesn’t hurry up and climb. Louis demands to know what exactly was said about his face. Ilan hastily knots his shoelaces.

“You going to climb something, Louis, or just watch me?”

“Thought I’d keep your lovely partner here company, see how you flail on this puppy, old chap.

“We’re old-fashioned, you can call my partner my wife.”

“Did I tell you the one about the Muslim, the Jew, and the Hindu who go to a bar?”

“On belay?”

“For about ten minutes now.”

“The Muslim pretends he isn’t drinking; the Jew pretends he isn’t paying; and . . .”

“OK, climbing then.”

“Climb on; please, I need to do work this afternoon.”

“I’ve got another one. A Rabbi comes to meet with . . .”

“Enough, Louis, I’m trying to climb.”

Louis grins. His lips are thin and his teeth seem to protrude directly from his dark skin. His eyes are black like Yedit’s, and almond like Yedit’s, ringed with eyeliner-thick eyelashes like Yedit’s. Next to each other, facing Ilan, their eyes could be siblings. Ilan wonders whether in Yedit’s parents’ day, Israeli soldiers went to India to celebrate the end of their army service.

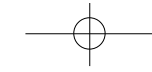
“Well, I’ll just tell your wife here after you leave the ground. You like my jokes, right, Yedit?”

“Sure, Louis. You and your jokes, the whole package. Now if we could just finally get this climb underway so that I can get home and finish up Book Three.”

Ilan pulls on a small shelf of rock inches over his head, tries to repress images of his wife surrounded by medieval rabbinic commentaries on the Song of Songs while he paces the house, shiftless and bored, and places the outside edge of his right shoe on a small lip of crystals protruding from the conglomerate rock, turning his right hip into the wall and stepping up. He places his left foot on another clump of crystals and slides his right hand into a two-inch-thick horizontal crack at the outer limits of his reach. The stone cools his hand as it slips into the Palestinian woman’s coat and he almost yanks it back out from the rock.

Breathe, he commands himself. Slow your heart rate.

And he breathes, but the blood pooling up through her clothes is both warm and cold on his hand. Pull open her coat, he whispers to the twenty-year-old with the gun. Pull open her coat so that you can see that she’s a bomber that you had to shoot her. That you had to shoot her. That you had

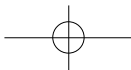


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to shoot. Ilan grunts gutturally, loudly, and mantles up to reach high, forcing himself not to look into the crack as he passes it. Sure, if she's a bomber then you had to shoot. And as he lifts his hand past his face on the way to a horizontal protrusion, moving his left foot onto a diagonal edge several feet up, he can't help but look for blood on his palms. Asshole, he shouts silently, and moves farther.

He's off now. The ground is below, though not far below, several feet, five maybe. His heels are level with Yedit and Louis' conspiratorially close heads. Funny that they should be his life's two poles: the woman who eagerly slaughters God and the man who quite willingly fought religious rivals across a Kashmiri glacier. Deep breath and twist his ass right to weight his right arm; walk feet up into a layback; don't fall now; pull hard and jam a hand into a giant pocket in the rock, too wide for either scribbled prayers or climbing gear; keep weight low to make the open hand grip stick to the sloping rock; walk feet up with arms straight; stand fast and grab the tiny ledge with the right hand; another move and that's the pin; relax the calves. God damn it, Yedit, pay attention – stop talking to Louis. Get a draw off the harness; fuck, finger stuck in the carabiner gate; shake it loose, shake it loose; OK, draw in hand; left hand is getting tired; the woman crumples, she doesn't even crumple: she's walking, then she's on the ground, no transition; keep it together; breathe; breathe; breathe out slowly while sighting down the barrel and gradually squeezing; breathe and shut the fuck up; clip the pin; good; reach for the rope dangling from the harness; fuck, slack, slack, slack; don't fall; pay attention to me; fuck; clip the rope; squeeze softly, squeeze slowly, squeeze at a point two inches left and three inches up from the sternum; rope's clipped; good; breathe. OK.

Ilan shakes out his right arm, matches to the same hold his left hand was on, shakes out his left arm, and blinks his eyes and his mind. Clear your head, asshole. But it's as if his head is a Yahtzee cup and every attempt to shake an idea free forms a new combination of disturbing letters. He remembers his parents picking a child's bicycle out of a mound of junk at a Jersey-shore thrift shop on a summer vacation. When he was afraid to try riding it in the store, they bought him a tricycle. For years afterwards, they cited his one-time fear to continue buying him larger tricycles, until he worried that eventually they would buy him one of the adult ones with an ice-cream vendor's box between the handlebars. And what good is climbing if the necessary focus the movement demands can't cleanse his mind? But there she is again, sauntering diagonally across the broad sidewalk towards his café table, now in a heavy overcoat, now in the Iranian porn star's white lace lingerie, now wearing nothing but lace-up stacked heel boots, a burkha flipped back to reveal her coy, downturned grin, her legs crossed in a runway model's stride, the bullet wound just above her sternum. Why is she back



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anyway? Ilan wants to recite the *Shemah*, but refuses to. The *Shemah* is an old prayer, one of the few that's not meant as a replacement for one of the daily animal sacrifices made in the Temple. One should recite it three times a day, ideally. It's funny, in that one recites it, much like the psalms, to ask God's help from danger. And one recites it at the moment that death is inevitable. All the famous martyrs tortured to death by the various occupiers of Biblical Israel died shouting the prayer's first line. He sees spots again, feels sweat forming between his fingers and the rock. It's been months, and before that, months too, since he even really thought about shooting the would-be martyr. Ilan needs to regain some upward momentum. If you could just wear your vest. If you could just tattoo the aching ring above your sternum. Then God damn Yedit's psalms. She doesn't believe, but he would. He would *da'aven* even. No, he cannot recite it, cannot possibly declare, "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One." He can have Yedit or he can have God, not both.

He begins climbing above the pin. It would be so wonderful to just lower off from here, let Louis finish the climb. But there's really no guarantee that the pin will bear weight anyway. Safer to keep moving. (Though if the pin won't hold his static weight, how's it supposed to hold the dynamic force of a fall?)

A series of sloping holds lies in front of him and he tries not to equate cold rock with cold barrels. He keeps his body weight low and places his feet carefully, moving farther and farther above the manky pin. A steel stake rotting out of the body it scars. He tries to concentrate on his breathing, slowly inhaling deep gasps of crisp autumn air. The temple was built without iron, without any metal that could be used for war. Ilan wants to know: is he going to die here, on this climb? That she steps onto her heels so deliberately, practically goose-stepping. No, she shuffles. She shuffled towards the café, uncertain, hemmed in by pedestrians. She could have blown herself up where she stood, raised her arms and ascended. But those last few minutes alive, the time it took to walk all the way to the café, were too precious for her to sacrifice. And if those last few moments were worth living, filled with whatever one is filled with (the psalms), she can't have been at peace (*Shemah Yisroel*); he could have talked her out of it!

No, the street was clear, he sat sipping a double espresso garnished with candied orange peel and staring across the boulevard at a scimitar of beach between concrete high-rises and she strode toward him. The blue skies and rotting leaves enter his lungs. A musky campsite. His blood flow slows. And then he is thirty feet above the ground, at the secret pocket that just barely accepts a pink tricam. His forearms ache. He tries to visualize himself moving past this spot and instead pictures his fingers giving out. Why the fuck didn't he sleep last night? You don't want to know, the small voice

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whispers. His shifting feet take him towards her, his gun pointed at the bundle of black rags oozing oil on the ground.

Focus. He unclips the carabiner with all three tricams on it from his waist and lifts it to his mouth. If he could just con his left forearm into a relaxing a bit. . . He bites down on the pink one's strap; for every step he takes forward, the screaming ring of people retreats several; he lets go of the biner and reaches for the strap with his hand. He takes his left hand from the gun's stock and extends his fingers towards the stone lip that has become her coat's hem. And then his right foot and his body jerk downwards and he screams, "Fall!"

But his left hand holds on to the edge of her coat, clings to the rock, catches him. He brings his right hand up to the pocket where the tricam should have gone, would have gone if he hadn't dropped it; he replaces his feet on either side of her legs and attempts to regain his breath. But the tricams are gone; the tricams are gone and there is no other protection. And given the way Louis has scurried back from the climb, the tricams came very close to hitting him. Good, for the Lord *Wrathfully repelled the decimation of his sword*. Ilan inhales, and his breath brings in the heady scents of soy sauce and blood. Dead-woman smell. Please, God, please, can't you let your faithful servant have even a little reprieve? Clinging to her coat, to her body, and shaking against the rock, Ilan promises that if he lives through this, he'll give a dollar to *tzedakah*. Not that he believes, of course, but he wonders, would that work? Would pledging the ceremonial dollar to charity, the act of *tzedakah* travelers promise to perform at their destination, transforming their trip into a mission to do a good deed, and thus summoning God's protective umbrage, work for a rock climb? He obviously can't give the money at the top of the climb. But now that he's already on the climb, he has to get down to give it. This is no time for brain-teasers. Besides, what is he? Some penitent clutching the edges of his *tallis* and beseeching Hashem? Ilan is no faithful servant. He's a sinner, a sinner! The small voice reasons, he meant it about the dollar—to the first person who asks, no judgment. He wishes he could let go of the Palestinian woman's body and willfully follow his tricams' arc to the ground at his wife's feet. But he cannot let go. Neither strong enough to kill, nor strong enough to die.

There is no gear for the secret pocket. Seven feet more and he can place a decent cam, gear that will actually hold a fall in all likelihood. But in those seven feet he will have to open the woman's coat. He will have to risk her exploding after all. He will have to risk her still being alive. He will have to risk her not having a bomb. *Viloh hekmoto bamilchamah*. No, God did not prop him up, make him stand, or give him courage, in war. Ilan tries to breathe. If he falls now, he will hit the ground. Rather, he will hit the ground from thirty feet up in the air. He tries to think how many people

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who've jumped off fourth-floor balconies live. Asshole, he reminds himself, that's an idiot thought. Think about Yedit.

Louis yells up to keep fucking moving. Yedit shouts to climb, keep climbing. Ilan lowers his left arm, shakes it out, puts it back up and shakes out his right arm. In the psalm, the speaker says that God has turned away by blunting the speaker's sword. But Ilan wonders if that's such a bad thing. After all, a body, a woman, a Palestinian woman, whom he shot, shot with his M16, lies between him and the cam placement. And what would have happened if hadn't shot her? the small voice asks. She would have blown up the whole café, Ilan whispers to himself.

"I can't stop thinking." Ilan yells down.

"This isn't the time, Ilan," Louis yells back.

"I just see her crumpling."

"Nothing's crumpling, buddy."

"I can't sleep."

"Get moving, buddy."

Below, he can see Yedit's teeth clamped down over her lower lip. She's too tense to speak, he figures, and yells, "I keep thinking about the Song of Songs, about the man knocking on his lover's door when she's inside with the other women."

"Not now, Habibi," Yedit says. "I need to focus on belaying, you need to focus on climbing."

"But when she answered the door he was gone, her soul was gone, the watch guards of the city beat her when she searched for him in the streets," Ilan persists.

"You can't stop there, Habibi," says Louis.

Or maybe she, the bomber, would have changed her mind. And then the great empty question of anti-terrorism presents itself for the umpteenth time: If the terrorist act responds to a mistaken and morally problematic act by the state acted upon, does that state then have the right to act ruthlessly to prevent that act? To which the question: How can anyone not act to save children from being torn apart by the old screws and rusty wire packed into a homemade explosive belt worn by a suicidal fundamentalist? The Palestinian woman was a girl, hardly religious to judge by appearances. An irrelevant side note, that. As if anyone believes it's the promise of virgins that drives men (and women) to martyrdom. You would do it if it meant absolution, the small voice whispers. You'll give the dollar. OK, Ilan answers, but I can't say the *Shemah*.

"Don't make me have to marry Yedit," Louis yells. "Don't die up there."

Sweat pours down his face and chest. If he falls he won't die "up there." He'll die on the ground right where they're standing. Sweat accumulates

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between his fingers and the rock. His own body lubricates his demise. His legs tremble. He'll fall. He is so obviously going to fall, so obviously wants to fall, and he can never love anyone after Yedit again anyway. I could have stayed drunk, he whispers to the rock. Hope is worse than hopelessness. I could have died feeling the way I feel. Why didn't you let me, Yedit, why trick me into this attempt at happiness? If he doesn't move he will fall, and if he falls, he will probably die. I don't want to be alone up here with a dead Palestinian woman, he whispers to the rock. And the rock plays back the Iranian porn star's thick bush and violet labia.

"Climb, Ilan; climb, please, please, please, Habibi."

His arms ache. The coat's hem is thickening with blood, threatening his grip. The rock radiates cold that chills his sweat-soaked organs. His legs tremble (sewing-machine legs, Elvis legs). He tries to lower his heels to take some pressure off his calves but the falling tricams keep dropping and dropping and dropping. He looks down, Yedit faces away from him. She's preparing to run backwards to take in slack. If he falls, she'll run in a desperate attempt to keep him off the ground. Always running to keep him from crashing. Finally, he understands why that second line of the *Shemah* is meant to be whispered. Out of mercy. The martyr is dying, he's spent his last breath shouting: *Shemah Yisroel Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*. He has no strength left. At best, if he lives that long, he can confess the second line to himself. Why make him feel that there was something more he could do? Better to require that he whisper it to himself, make mandatory the inevitable, that private reassurance at the very end.

"Come on, buddy; it's easy moves from where you are. Get to the roof."

Baruch sham civod malchooto liolam va'ed: Blessed is the name of his courageous kingdom forever and always.

"Ilan, you have to move."

He lifts his left foot, places it on an edge and pushes. He forces air in and out of his lungs, and then he moves his right hand, grips a rounded grey knob over his head and feels it dig into his fingertips. It bends beneath his pressure, he thinks; he thinks, I'm holding onto the cartilage in her nose. It can't possibly hold his whole body weight. He turns his head down and scrunches his face against the image of his hand pulling her cheeks from her eyesockets, against the image of his mother pulling chicken apart, and wills his elbow to straighten, his shoulder to relax, his body to hang from the hold. He seizes on an image of his house: a square stone farmhouse with a four-sided peaked wooden roof. It sits on a rise in the close-hemmed deciduous woods. This morning, they woke to strong sunlight through the east-facing bedroom windows. After pattering down the worn-wood stairs, Ilan observed frost in the crevices of the Adirondack chairs on the flagstone patio beyond the sunroom's glassed-in walls. The house is built out of fleece blan-

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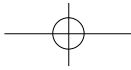
kets, fabric softener and fresh-scented dishwasher detergent. Ilan wants to curl on the living room couch with a latte and a magazine. What have you done to deserve such comfort? he wonders. If he falls, Yedit will run backwards, but that won't save him. He must climb higher, farther away from her diminishing form. And in the disconnected glow of under-cabinet kitchen lighting, Yedit shuttles away from him, or he shuttles away from her, Ilan can't tell which but that the house-image gradually collapses, his arms tremble, the Palestinian woman's nose twitches in his grasp. Moving upwards only increases the distance of the fall. Fuck you, asshole, he corrects himself, the length of the fall no longer matters: it's all too far. Another hand up, another move. If the space between not falling and safety is the woman's body, then he's parallel with her breasts.

Yedit now pays attention to him exclusively. He can see, in his periphery, the cocoon from within which she isolates Louis, who continues to hang on her borders, whispering words she does not hear. Louis whispers that he and Ilan have climbed far worse. He whispers that Ilan once froze in the middle of an ice route in the Catskills after his feet blew out. Ilan hung there by his axes, his arms slowly giving up, dangling like a leaf melting out of an icicle. But then, as if by magic, Ilan kicked one crampon-tipped foot into the ice, and then the other, slowly began to climb again. Louis whispers that a god haunts Ilan, a deity who will neither disappear into ether nor offer salvation; Ilan wishes he could cast Louis' voice out of his head. Louis putting math to God, making God into an arithmetic, an algorithmic truth, a half-understood minute dimension, a body of constants for equations of the unknowable.

Ilan wishes he could recapture the empty-headed climbing space he'd been in before the tricam incident. Ilan wishes that he wasn't lying to himself when he imagines a point in this climb in which he was one with the rock. Just make the moves. He ungracefully brings a thigh over her thigh, braces it against the rock, turns a heel into her side, pushes. His elbows stay bent and protruding, his knees splayed. Turn a hip in. Straighten your arms. Climb efficiently. But her body is in the way, pushes him out from the wall. He remembers Louis instructing him, back at the beginning, that if you couldn't do a move properly, you certainly couldn't do it by flailing. But Ilan cannot climb efficiently.

Say it, say the *Shemah*. When did he last? On a plane flight? An amusement-park ride? A roller coaster? To declare God would be to curse Yedit. He can't. He just can't. If he sides with God, believes in God, then he has to declare his wife, the woman he loves, the woman who's given him hope, a house, a life beyond drunkenness, he has to declare that woman an Apikoris, an enemy of God, unfit to live.

Then he's stuffing a number-one Camelot deep in the crack beneath the



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roof. He's got the rope clipped into it. He's safe; he's past the lump of woman's body, looks down, sees nothing but rock. Another challenging twenty feet remains above him. The harder climbing, in fact. But it's safe. The cam makes it safe to fall.

He's tired. He reaches back to his harness and grabs another cam. The crack's big and forgiving; without much effort, Ilan finds a second placement. Using another sling, he equalizes the two pieces so that they share his weight, the force of his body. He calls down for Yedit to take.

