

TODAY YOU ARE A MAN

28

Superman on Batman. The weight of them bound together. Sharp smells of yellow and blue ink, cold aluminum shelving, cardboard dust. Flaking spines repeat AMAZING AMAZING AMAZING. Higher up, Will Eisner's thick digests of tenement stories trace his grandparents' bent backs and Yiddish rants in scrolling lines of brown on white. Green Jell-O alien fingers probe some space-blondé's inflated tits. Peter breathes them in, these particles of floating worlds. Today you are a man. He's so hopeless only a spider can save him, and not the one who told Wilbur's farmer to keep kosher. Bedtime stories from before he was the horse in the Purim play, every year. Bending over in the stockroom, he hoists another box of *SHAZAM!*, his body big but flabby at thirteen. The way he bends over to talk to his father, or rather to listen, one word to Nathan's clever dozen. In a comic book, Nathan would be the red-headed scientist who convinced Congress to build a Mars launch out of rubber bands. He would persuade Steve Trevor to stick around and look pretty though Wonder Woman would never, ever marry him, and by the way, just because she disappears at odd hours and you found star-spangled underwear in the hamper, there's no evidence that she's living a double life. Peter realizes he's too interested in what happens to Steve. He wants to be one of the chosen ones. He works hard and doesn't sit back here all day reading while his boss Jonas smokes another joint at the cash register, his chair tilted back against a wall layered with drawings of dragon fangs and lightning-bolt fists. Laconic, lean Gary Jonas is his father's friend, but he acts like Peter will amount to something. Enough to dress him up as the Jolly Green Giant in the Greenwich Village Halloween parade, with Jonas and his friends as the Fruit of the Loom guys. Peter's parents are open-minded, except his mother, but soon she won't count anymore. Three hundred copies of *Popeye*. Underneath them the good stuff, the wide-eyed, round-assed elfin girls, which Peter doesn't look at. Bending over in the stockroom.

*

Tears in the noodle soup. Peter's mother winces when she splits open the chicken, its blood-brown organs unsafely contained by cold cracking bones.

Five years old, he's at the kitchen table, making tracks in a mound of flour with his Hot Wheels taxi. The yellow paint's still shiny, and the doors snap open and shut. It's cleaner than the cab that rushed him to Aunt Doris's when his mother went to the hospital, with huge black vinyl seats that exhaled stale tobacco and pine air freshener when he sank into them. Peter's angry, like God. She'd taken the toy from him during the Shabbat service but he stole it back from her coat pocket when she went to start dinner. Father still at the office. That coat is the scent of his mother, face powder and fresh bread, that stiff brown wool with the buttons that are shaped like root beer barrels but don't taste like anything. God smashed the Egyptians. He buries his car in the flour. Never again, his mother cried when she came home, Peter overhearing on purpose under the bedroom door. His father's voice, deep for a little man, promising they'd try for another baby, but Peter didn't believe it. That was the voice that said when you're older you can have a puppy and a ride on the fire engine. At Aunt Doris's seder he killed the firstborn with grape juice. We have to thank God for the one we've got, Peter's mother says all the time now, even when no one else is in the room. Then she kisses his head till his hair feels wet.

29

*

Peter knows what a condom looks like. It's a worm, a flattened skin in the gravel by the chicken-wire fence around the Horatio Street playground. Knowing things is good whether or not you can use them. At eleven he solves for x , y , and z . He knows that Reagan is bad but he can't vote. His classmates clapped when he said if Carter lost he would jump out a window. He did and he didn't. The homeless live in the bathroom, though he never sees them. The playground toilets are in a brick hut with green doors that say Men and Women, not Boys and Girls. Since he got too big for the monkey bars, he doesn't know what to do. Cigarette butts under the sink. He wants to study wars. Sixth-grade history is the Middle Ages, slideshow of lords in velvet and dancing corpses. Zombies in school, who knew? In the bathroom once he saw Walter, he'd swear to it, go into a stall with another pair of sneakers under the door. The great plague of 1348 killed one-third of Europe's population. Walter sits behind him in history and homeroom. He has skinny legs and wears plaid trousers instead of jeans. He brings brown rice and spinach for lunch in a plastic tub. Some of the kids look down at their desks when

Mr. Dushane clicks through the slides of Dürer and Bosch, peeled bodies heaped on hell's streets. On Peter's desk, a faded blue ballpoint drawing like a torpedo that he guesses is meant to be the thing between his legs. He spies Walter looking down so he stares at the projector screen till his unblinking eyes burn and water.

*

Lost, down the drain. Lost on a desert island. A shovel at the beach, red fleck on the outgoing tide. Lost like words in a dream. Like a Latin verb at the chalkboard. Robinson Crusoe lost hope till he saw a bigger man's footprint. Can you be lost and still have company? Lost in a lifeboat, "They Ate Their Young Ship-Mate" in Hitchcock's book of true-life horrors. The black lady in the subway presses a pamphlet into his hands. Do you know Jesus? His father tears it up. She lost the baby, Aunt Doris whispers. Can you remember where you last saw it? He expects a laugh but gets slapped and cried over. The point of the joke, lost. He's too young to know what belongs on TV and what could really happen. Lost like a cat on a telephone pole poster. The baby rides the bus through his dreams, now disguised as a bag left under a seat, now a rolled-up umbrella. He pokes his mother all through the Shabbat service. Here I am. The chariots of Egypt and their horses. He's got to pee in the bathtub. Green water sucks through the drain, the smiling Cracker Jack sailor tumbles out of the rubber boat, down the rusty hole that goes to gone. He cries for the whole Red Sea.

*

Once Peter sees a girl in a movie who looks like Walter. He and his mother watch TV late at night when his father's out of town on trial or preparing for a case. Black and white on PBS, the swoop and fanfare of the orchestra, soft-lit faces of women who call their husbands *Mister Miniver* and *Mister De Winter*. The girl wears thick black-rimmed glasses, and when her boyfriend takes them off, she's pretty as a bird. Half the kids in Peter's sixth-grade class use their parents' first names. He started saying "Nathan" and "Barbara" last year but he's going back to Dad and Mom because he can tell she likes that better. Sharing a bowl of popcorn with hot sauce and Bette Davis. When he hits Walter in the face with a snowball his glasses break and a cut swells

above his eye. Faggot, holler the boys who play basketball with Peter. He's slow but growing tall and the best at blocking shots. They laugh at Walter's scrunched-up face dirty with gravel and snot. "Faggot" in Peter's history book means a bundle of sticks. Flames close around the bare-breasted witch in the woodcut like the huge petals of that man-eating flower in *Little Shop of Horrors*.

*

Sometimes books tell Peter things he doesn't want to know. Jonas's store is called Rogues' Galaxy. Up front are locked display cases of strutting, stomping figurines: Darth Vader in a real cloth cape, Catwoman with impossibly long legs sleek as black licorice whips. Then the kiddie distractions, cheap newsprint *Archies*. In *When the Wind Blows* a nice British couple, Mr. and Missus Pillsbury Doughboy, die of radiation poisoning, their faces greening like bad cheese in the dim fallout shelter. On Nathan's bookshelf between *The God That Failed* and the collected opinions of Thurgood Marshall there is a slim volume of poetry. Peter's eighth-grade history class is studying *Brown v. Board of Education*. Comics and wrestling are the only places he sees what could be beautiful. At the back of Rogues' Galaxy he steals minutes, five here five there, with the naked books. Jonas strolls past, dusting the shelves, nods at him man to man. R. Crumb feels all wrong, happy butts bouncing brother on sister, dog on cat. It can't be that good, to tear through the picture in his first reader, Dick Jane Puff Spot. He's in Nathan's home office looking for the Marshall book when he finds it. *Moonflower* by Ada Porter. The cover is white with a white lotus, streamlined as a spaceship. Peter hears words like bells, clean as snow, far-off as stars. Ada Porter knows prison. Sweet injection. Release into pain. A client? *Moonflower* is dedicated to N. In the weeks ahead Peter will have to study this question, whether separated children can be equal, what separation equals, how equals separate. When he tilts *Moonflower*, a clutch of wallet-sized photos spills from beneath the back flap. A baby, then a girl growing in school pictures year by year, turtlenecks and plastic barrettes and missing teeth, up to this fierce face of nine or ten with dark brows and green eyes like Ada Porter's on the back cover of the only poetry book Peter's father owns.

*

In the boys' locker room, in the showers. Steam not dense enough to hide who's still chicken-scrawny and who feels a different animal coming on. Peter's black curls have spread to the clefts of his body. He's relieved by basketball's speechless harmony, its intense, shifting pairings. In the room of echoing, sweating green tiles, the boys bellow and flick towels at unlucky legs, chatter too loud to avoid watching each other piss. He's given up on languages, faked his way through *muchas gracias* and *Carthago delenda est*, and is learning his Torah portion by ear. He chose Isaac on Mount Moriah to upset his parents. If he can explain this one, everything else will be easy. Barbara calls it making *aliyah*, leaving her job as head emergency room nurse at St. Vincent's to work on a kibbutz. The black brushstrokes of the backwards letters are inked into the skin of the scroll. He sees them march behind his eyelids at night. Sounding out the letters on his mother's travel visa. They're calling it a trial separation. Peter dreams of a bound and muscular Isaac straining against the ropes and wakes with his sheets sticky.

*

32

When he is born, she isn't. When she is born, he falls off his tricycle and they put three stitches in his lip. When she is born, he's playing astronaut with a casserole dish on his head. He claims the living room for the moon. When he's learning to cut with round-edged scissors, she is screaming in wet diapers. The tricycle hurtles down the asphalt hill of Washington Square Park, and he lifts his hands from the handlebars only when he knows it's too late to stop. When she's tying her shoes, he is asking the Four Questions. When he is listening to records (William wants a doll), she is listening to records (me and Bobby McGee), when he is in fourth fifth sixth seventh grade (Brooklyn Heights), she is napping under her desk in Cleveland, sounding out the letters in Buffalo, building a baking-soda volcano in Boston, when her mother is reading to her (the highwayman came riding, riding), his mother is reading to him (Joseph dreamed that his brothers' sheaves all bowed down), when their father is reading to him (I am Spartacus), their father is not reading to her. Why is this night different from all other nights?

*

The night they take inventory at Rogues' Galaxy, Peter gets lit for the first time. Let me show you the good stuff. Jonas passes him the earliest *Batman*, sleeved in plastic. The joint goes back the other way, damp from mouth to mouth. A thug struck down the Waynes before young Bruce's eyes and the rest is alternate-history. Jonas has a monkey face, comic-sad, thin lips bracketed with lines. Your dad and I go back a long way. Longer than Ada? The carton they're sharing sinks under their sitting weight. Thick sweet smoke joins the smell of yellowing paper rising to the rafters. The cops busted this place back in '75, some short stuff posing as a kid, asking for *Fritz the Cat*, Japanese stroke books, what have you. Donald Duck and his uncle run around without pants, nobody complains. Jonas inhales. Peter feels a tropical forest blooming from his lungs. Yeah, Nathan stood up for me in court. What's the difference between sex and violence? We give 'em Captain fascist America, but show some tail and you go to jail. Peter giggles. Jonas rhymes again. Batman frowns through his newly constructed mask, which is black, peaked, and stretchy, as if cut from a pair of panties that only a mistress would wear.

33

*

At fourteen Peter will hoist baskets of grapes and thick ruffled kale under the desert sun. Waking to the whistle of birds and gunfire over the hill.

That you knew all this time.
She was a witness in an old case.
What kind of man leaves his child?
Either way.
That you didn't tell me, when you knew I wanted.
She's not yours.
We could have worked it out.
I chose you didn't I?
You chose everything.
God.
Does she know who you are?
You've been waiting to go there for years so go.
And my son.
He won't last.

What kind of man.
A witness in the case.

*

There are always wars. And there will always be lemon trees and oil and the nasal wail of old men bobbing their heads in Sabbath chant and stars sharp as glass in the purple sky, but Peter will not always be fourteen and Gilad, who is eighteen, old enough to wear a sash of bullets across his chest, will not always lie beside him under the dusty leaves of the olive grove, asleep with his buttons open.

*

34

The hamburgers are burnt again. Peter is through with America. Barbara moved in with Aunt Doris till the day of her flight. Every night, Dad's burgers with English muffins and ketchup, sometimes spaghetti. Postcards flutter in, sunsets over tiered walls of buttery Jerusalem stone. Ada brings the girl for visits. They put them together in the den but Peter's fed up with TV except for *Knight Rider*. Once an actual letter, three folded pages, and photos of his mother smiling and barefoot among the cabbages. That couldn't really happen, the girl says after KITT drives through a flaming wall, and chirps out an explanation about melting points and combustion engines. She wears flannel shirts and her brown hair is unbrushed. He's waiting for his mother to say come with me. For school to end. For Ada and his father to emerge from the kitchen where there are no eggs because Peter made a soufflé, just to prove he could, and now he will check whether any of the poet's red lipstick has migrated from her mouth to Nathan's. Wasting his time. The girl is here, after all. Proof of everything. She shovels three portions of the soufflé into her skinny face. Nathan lifts an eyebrow. He's prepared to be amused by whatever he doesn't understand. Day to their night, Barbara claws stones from the soil, gives over on the Sabbath. The thirsty stay thirsty till the day of repentance is through.

*

Gilad will pin him down sometimes in the barracks and feel how he's grown harder, his American baby fat burned away bending and picking grapes under the coppery sun, fasted away on beans and brown bread passed down the common table, where he will know enough even on the first day to swallow his ache at being seated so far from his mother, all the laughing brown youth together with him pale as the one peeled potato in the heap.

*

So no more bubble gum and World Wrestling Federation *SmackDown*. Okay, kid. Jonas sticks him with books on communism because Peter's hopeful chatter is all kibbutz, counting the weeks of awful leisure till he goes. Try on Marx for size, big angry bear defending the starving cubs. You like what Engels says about Mom and Pop? Peter reads about the bourgeois trap of marriage, sitting on a crate of *Archies*, holding in the joint's sweet smoke as long as possible, he reads about vows capturing the woman's unpaid labor, licking the orange dust of Doritos from his fingers, another temporary indulgence. All he knows is he's the only one in his house who can fry an egg. Do you believe that...? Jonas says he can hold any point of view for two minutes. Imagine there's no country, I wonder if you can. They smoke together, a habit now when Rogues' Galaxy goes dark at 10 p.m., and Jonas hums John Lennon. That's what I'm talking about. He winks. Peter, like everyone who was in diapers during the summer of love, has grown up with nightmares of the red phone ringing on President Reagan's desk as Russian missiles streak toward New York. Nothing to kill or die for, the brotherhood of man. Whether *Das Kapital* is meant for him as a deterrent or a dare, they're the same thing really. Like when Ada's girl Prue is tripping out over Ozzy Osbourne on MTV, playing air guitar like an epileptic, and Peter dares her to try Ozzy's famous stunt, and she follows him down to the fridge and not only chews off but actually swallows a piece of the raw rubbery chicken wing, so of course he has to do it too and they're both sick. Not a bad kid.

35

*

At sixteen Peter will be asleep in Tompkins Square Park and not feel his high-tops being eased off his size-ten feet. In a cardboard box with a blanket like a sick dog, on the ground with the manic poets and old men spilling wine over

their beards and those thin white boys only Reagan could ignore. Peter, invisible, waiting for coins to patter like rain on the grape leaves of far-off Kiryat Shemona, slow nights with plenty of time to curse God and start talking to Him again because you're bored. On the radio, talk of quarantines, tainted blood, everyone suspicious of their hairdresser. Nathan won't always win his case for the wasted-away teacher, dentist, hotel clerk forced from his job when silence didn't equal enough. Peter, writing his stories on poverty for the school newspaper, sitting through verdict after verdict, on the hard back bench where the old ladies of the jury can't see him. And Nathan's anxious, understanding look will find his son across the courtroom, and Peter will be glad of one more thing his father's figured out about him without being told.

*

36

God is theirs, birthright more ancient than the ruined wall that the men fold their prayers into, deeper than the common well where Peter will hoist a bucket of cool water for the goats and avoid the lithe dark-eyed girls who would play Rebecca to his Isaac, encouraged by his mother's murmurs. God for sure, God possessed for ages longer than the scrublands that will have to be retaken at dawn. Side by side under the olive tree, Gilad will tell him tales of night patrols through slums packed with mad men who strap bombs to their chests, children who beg for candy to lure you onto roadside mines. No one has seen God, but Peter will hear Him marching through the morning songs of the young warriors who make every joke and every bullet count. The mothers of the kibbutz will look for the victory of God in their grandchildren. But Peter will close his eyes in his dormitory bunk and see Gilad, slick from their dip in the river, flushed with homemade wine.

*

At fifteen Peter will give up his room to his sister. After the wedding, when he was gone. Peter will encamp in the basement apartment of his dad's brownstone, where upstairs his dad and Ada will open a bottle of merlot and Prue will play the same folk song for the tenth time on the used guitar he brought her back from Israel. Yossi's guitar, Yossi the martyr. Two thousand years ago at Masada the mothers decided it was better for their children to stop breathing than to live with the enemy. Taking away their blue sky and

dippers of water, blessings even a slave could have enjoyed. If they hadn't all agreed, it wouldn't have worked. Nathan, upstairs, will be rehearsing his closing to the jury. The case of the fired fireman. Tuning out Prue singing "Mary of the Wild Moor" in her flat soprano. This is the United States of America. Father, dear father, she cried / Come down and open the door. Where a man shouldn't lose his livelihood for what he does in the privacy of his home. Or the child in my arms will perish and die / From the wind that blows across the wild moor. Peter in the ganja-heavy dark will meditate on the green glow of the stars Prue helped him stick to the basement ceiling. Opening the windows before she comes. Before sleep, he will imagine he can hear them above him, each person turning the pages of their separate books, like the first whispers of snow.

*

Come see the cliffs at Petra. Gilad and Yossi returning from a week on duty too jacked to sleep, pulling Peter from his sweaty bunk, Peter happy to watch the sun rise over any old pile of rocks if it's where Gilad is going. No time for Yossi to shave his goat-face or turn in their rifles, against regulations but the eyes of God can't be open this early, else Peter couldn't stand so long watching honeyed light play on Gilad's bare shoulders. Glowing like the rose-red stones of this ruined city of the Nabateans, palatial Roman portals nearly flush with the rough rock face. A lump in his throat with longing for what never was, a story entered centuries too late, the mountain lair empty, the hero fallen to bones. Pretending it's sweat he wipes from his eyes as the others smoke cigarettes and laugh. A day for ripening olives and tanning skin under a sun hot as a new-forged shield. The road back dusty and rutted, Yossi's irritating sing-along to the radio jingles for American soda, Gilad laughing with bared teeth then shouting Yossi shouting halt the ragged girl from nowhere her scrawny brown arm pulled back to throw and Gilad shoots the child crumples the stone drops from her hand rolling slowly to a stop in the blood-dark sand.

*

Bending over in the stockroom. What do you want? Breathing on his neck. Batman and Robin are silent. He thinks it's a mistake when Jonas doesn't

step away. That he didn't hear. What do you need? Fingers at his belt. The first step is to shed your skin. Afraid, he gasps, holds still as Han Solo in carbonite. Fingers below. He doesn't understand and he does. What one man can do to another. Superman takes off his gray flannel suit. Cold in the stockroom. He's nothing but skin under his clothes, after all. But torn, but wanting, split, oh full of something hard as metal, boiling roaring ashamed. Hearing the voice in him. Today, today. This is what you are.