

The Name

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One Week

Today is eleven days, which is one week and
four days of the Omer. Eternity of Power.

The turmoil of soul tonight, like the horror of plague that burst out in the days of the Counting among the students of Rabbi Akiba, who didn't treat each other with respect and died an evil death... Ever since I began the Holy Confession, the night before last, near the time of the Midnight Prayer, my balance seems upset – and tonight, uneasy, as if ghosts come back to roam over the earth pester me – now, on Walpurgisnacht, the first night of May, Eternity of Power – as if the hurled shouts incite thought, thrust the fingers---

Yes, I know, among the laws of repentance is for the penitent constantly to call out before God, crying and entreating – I shouted; and perform charity to his force and separate himself far from the object of his sin – I went far away almost without return; and to change his name – once, twice, three times I changed to say: *I am a different person and I am not the same one who sinned*, and to travel into exile from his home – For I was exiled to the end of the world, on paths with no return, on roads that lead to ruins, only in the end to come here, to the last city, the last house, the last frontier on the shore of the desert, the sand that covers Your hand – *and Jerusalem shall become heaps – The Mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it –*

To continue now. Despite the weakness of my mind, despite the recoil from what will have to be repaired tonight – To strive and to continue – With Your strength if not with mine –
Please, God, do for Your Name's sake.

On the tenth morning of the Omer last year, you prayed, May It Be Your Will, to start weaving the prayer shawls, and you tore the flashing whiteness from the paper wrapping. You didn't heed the voice that burst out at you, sounding the alarm in the day and growing strong all through the night. Maybe it was because of the fear of what was stirred that you didn't stop. Unthinking, you buried your fingers in the softness of the white yarn, and a faintness passed through you like the vapor of the quiet breath of Mala. Again, after all this time, she

breathed on your cheek, and her moaning wound around and struck your breath. The room, the loom, the windows, all were swept away in the strong vortex. Until you caught your breath, and the warmth returned to your fingers, which had frozen in the yarn.

The first time (at any rate the first time I remember) that she touched her, the little girl was four years old. (Her outburst at the dull sequence of long, mute months, of a faded everyday, was so violent that it scorched through them like a searchlight. How to go back there now, even for the confession I have to make to You, please God, receive my words with mercy.)

The parents weren't home, and the little girl stayed alone with Aunt Henia, who came down from Haifa. The week before had been her birthday, and on that afternoon she went with Father, who was going to buy her a present. First they passed the store to see if Mother was managing all right by herself. As usual, the store was full of women, fighting over a box of potatoes, grabbing the few pieces of merchandise away from each other, raising their voices, their faces flushed. Mother stood behind the counter, her hair stuck under a kerchief, scared, not saying a word. The little girl waited next to the rotten smelling boxes of onions until Father lined the women up and put the potatoes on the pan of the scales. Then he took her hand and they walked on the big, crooked sidewalk. She thought Father would be silent as always, only every now and then shaking himself and saying something to her, and then the darkness of his face closing him up again, but today he held her hand in his big, smooth hand, whose fingernails were clipped straight, bent over, and said slowly that he and Mother had decided to buy her a birthday present, a xylophone. (She didn't yet know what the word meant, or what the gift meant.) He repeated very deliberately, and asked her to repeat after him, *xy-lo-phone*. And by then she wished they wouldn't buy her a present, that Father would just leave her alone, so what if she couldn't say it right, *kli-so-phone*, but Father held her hand tight, and repeated it over and over until tears came into her eyes and she didn't know why, because after all they were going to buy her a present, a *klisophone*.

At home, Father placed the small instrument on the table in the dining room, which was always dim with drawn curtains. He put down the ladder-shaped instrument, its colored wooden plates growing smaller, down to the final, yellow plate, held at the ends by two nails, and next to it the two small mallets with the blue knobs. That day Father didn't go back to the store, and she didn't go out to play in the yard but stayed there on the upholstered chair, her fists closed in Father's hands, a mallet in each of them.

“Yes, now play, child, play.”

She looked, uncomprehending, first at Father and then at the colorful instrument that had cost her tears even before she knew its shape.

“Yes, play, with both hands, play, Malinka, like this.” He bent over and pushed her hands to make the mallets touch the plates, and his jacket twisted next to her. “Yes, like this, like this, harder.” He pushed her hands and banged hard.

She would certainly have burst out crying from the pain, or else, as usual, she would have held her breath with all her might, to keep it in, if the instrument hadn’t suddenly produced a high, resounding, yellow ring, full of light, and then another one, a green one, and then a blue one, and she burst out laughing, and Father was smiling at her and stroking her head. “More, more, Malinka,” he whispered.

And now she was absorbed in the joy of the bell-like sounds, she raised and lowered the little mallets, and her fists ran over the keyboard, pulling after them a trail of echoes of bell-like echoes, purple and pink and blue.

But when she lifted her laughing face to see Father whirling with her in the cascade of tones, the mallets froze in her hands. His face was contorted, and he was looking at her with loathing, like a stranger.

“You play ugly. Ugly, Amalia!” he wailed, turning his back to her, his face covered with an awful black shadow, and going out of the room, leaving her alone on the chair with the prickly upholstery, and in her eyes the colors were all mixed up, floating in a turgid pond of sharp stains, blues, oranges, purples, yellows, and Father’s stormy steps pounded from the other room, as he paced back and forth for a long time.

When Mother came home from the store that night, they didn’t talk about the instrument. It stood on the cabinet, next to the big box of the radio, a colorful outcast, captured in the rasping tones of the radio and its flickering lightbulbs. Only the next afternoon, when Father went to the store and she was alone and her knees were dirty from the sand in the yard, did she carefully take the colorful instrument and the mallets from their place next to the radio. But when she heard the murmured Polish conversation of Father and Mother through the window, she cut off the cascade of colors and put the instrument back. Cunningly, she even remembered to lean the mallets a bit sideways, just as Father had cast them aside.

For a few days she did this carefully, always managing to put everything back where it had been before Father and Mother came in. But on the day Aunt Henia came to them from Haifa and everything in the house was mixed up because Aunt Henia was always opening and closing the windows, she didn’t notice that Father and Mother were coming in, and went on banging even when the door opened and they entered.

Father burst into the dining room and yelled at her to stop, that she was only banging and pounding and didn’t know how

to place, that she should stop, stop! His face was covered by the black shadow and his hands were shaking. Mother ran into the room after him and called out, "What do you want from the child, Stashek? What do you want from the child! She never played, you want her to play well all at once, one-two-three?!" She dragged him out of the room with her frail body.

Mother and Father went back to the store, walking silently beside each other, keeping a forced pace, as if they would lose each other if they didn't stick together, while Aunt Henia stayed with the little girl. The instrument and its mallets were cast aside on the floor.

"Ah, Amalia, Amalia, you really don't know *anything*," chirped Aunt Henia with the cloying smell of lipstick that always clung to the little girl's cheeks like a scar of family love, "you really don't know *aaanything*."

The little girl smiled politely at the aunt who came to take care of her, and gazed vacantly at the floor tiles.

"They didn't ever tell you about the little girl Father loved?" Aunt Henia smacked her lips as if she were telling a fairy tale. "There was once a little girl who played the piano so very gloriously! Like an angel! She lived in the house next door to us; she could play Chopin's *Funeral March* after she heard them playing it when a funeral passed by in the street. A musical genius, that girl, a real genius, Malinka..."

The little girl smiled at her aunt because she thought Aunt Henia was calling her by her nickname, Malinka, and she was still gazing at the mica spots on the floor tiles, and didn't hear the clumsy prattle, but there was something unfamiliar in Aunt Henia's voice, and she straightened up there on the cool floor. Her aunt wasn't looking at her at all; she went on in her rising chirp, nodding her powdered face.

"Your father played the violin from the time he was a little boy; he'd go to Mala's house every afternoon to play music with her. I remember, even then he said they'd always be together, Bride and groom." The aunt laughed to herself. "They were together all the time, even when Malinka became a great pianist and Stashek wasn't playing music with her anymore. She played in the Sary Teatr, and in the Opera. Everybody went to hear her... and when we went into the ghetto, the SS allowed her to go out to play her music. She was our angel. Our angel. Mala!"

The little girl couldn't take her eyes off the white powdered face jumping in and out of the light and shadow, which, for some reason, pushed a twinge in her stomach and throat.

"They never parted. Never. Stashek's great love... Even in the camp, when nobody had any strength left, she and your father made a plan to escape together. When he was working in the quarry... yes... well... You can't imagine how fantastic she was! What heroism! Even when they wanted to finish her off! All us women standing there, they made us come out of

the huts for the *Appell*, standing and looking at her. Like a queen she was there, like on stage when she played. So proud! She looked at us, you know, in the middle of the *Appellplatz*, and finished herself off with a razor blade she was hiding in her hair, so free! Mala!”

The little girl didn't understand what Aunt Henia was talking about or why she said that Father worked in a quarry and not in their fruit and vegetable store, and anyway, what was a quarry, and why was she talking about a razor blade after Mother yelled at her never to dare play with that, and why cut your hair, and her heart pounded wildly, *appapatz*, *appapatz*, and her throat was choked with twinges, *appapatz*.

At night another little girl, wearing a black dress with a white collar, came into her room, opened the drawers, and rummaged around in her things. But she didn't yell because she was afraid the other little girl would get mad and Father would punish her. She just moved to the corner and made room in her bed for the other little girl, next to the dolls, so she wouldn't get mad. For a few nights, the other little girl slept with her in bed, touching her with her smooth dress. Once she tried to finish off the strange little girl but couldn't because she didn't exactly know how, and she only called her Malinka, and shoved her under the pillow in the *appapatz* and covered everything up and smacked the pillow with all her might, but suddenly her heart started yelling, and she picked up the pillow in a terrible panic before the little girl in the black dress died and Father yelled, and she lay on her side with her heart throbbing and didn't budge, because now she was sure the other girl would kill her for what she had done, and in the meantime she silently planned how she would undress her and put her naked on a pole she'd stick in her pipi, on a cart like in Purim carnival, so everybody in the street would see how she was naked and would laugh at her and so would the kids next door. And that was nice to think about, even if she was scared. But then Aunt Henia left and the second Malinka didn't come at night anymore, and she played clanging notes on the xylophone and nobody mentioned it. But for a long time she went on hiding the *appapatz* under her pillow.

(Everything is so slippery. So impossible. Only the shout slices. The night as always is deep, soothing; except for me, everything in it moves in grooves of time as natural as breathing – dryness wafts from the hot dust, creeps to the desert blended with the smoke of dung in the neighbors' yards, drenched in the heavy odors of the beds crowded together in their homes down to the bottom of the valley, to the spring covered with darkness. Everything flows forward, sunk in now, tomorrow, next year, in the young and decaying flesh of time, and only here the shout dries the bit of moisture. Rips everything, leaving nothing. Only pain is definite here,

imperishable – and how will I have a share in the softness of the night You spread, how will I have a part in the slopes of dust?

Everything is so slippery, as if nothing happened. And even the very rare waves of regret for Isaiah only increase the silence. They lie in the distance, like massed clouds, hanging on the horizon, waiting.)

What can I say to You, what can I tell You? You know all things, secret and revealed. You know the mysteries of the universe, the secrets of everyone alive. You probe my innermost depths. You examine my thoughts and desires. Nothing escapes You, nothing is hidden from You. Please, Holy Name, be not too wrathful.

And who knows if the effort is in vain, the countless thin shiny silk threads I tie to the blue curtain in the great haste of the counting, ten, twelve hours a day, to finish on time? Who knows on what side of the dust I weave – front or back?

And in my hands the thread entwines into the Torah Curtain, bringing me – irrevocably – closer, as it gets shorter, to You.