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**CLOSE TO THE BODY – FIFTH PLACE**

**I remember a tree. Its crown awning the path. I remember a large trunk, thicker than any I had seen before. I remember roots cleaving the black earth, bursting it asunder, like snakes fighting free and then, twisted by the chill of the air, plunging their heads back underground. There was a large crevice in the trunk. I peeked inside and ran.**

A storm is coming. A black spot gradually growing, widening and expanding, stirring the skies until it is transformed into a whirlpool, crimson over the Jerusalem mountains. Red and terrible, the wind glides down the arched mountains, winding down over the pathways. It collects under the porch, then climbs the walls built with Jerusalem stone, blows through the neighbor’s house with the little garden that is punctuated by dwarfish citrus trees and a gray plastic doghouse for the miniature canine, Zoe, that has been barking for hours, tail stretched and ears erect.

“Shut up already! The neighbor screams, blind to the crimson wind, slithering its way to me like a poisonous snake, wishing to paint the soles of my feet with drops of blood.

I press my legs together, shrinking into myself, holding the white rail that encloses the porch, following the movements of the wind, waiting to hear the sound of jackals urging each other to howl at dusk, their wailing breaking against the mountains only to be carried up into the sky. I have only moments to stand like this before my husband notices my actions and commences scolding me to get back into bed and not to leave it again. Not even if I need to pee? Not even. This is why they have brought me a bedpan, and Vivie from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm. Then Vivie leaves my house to do some overtime with Pops, her invalid patient in the next building. She sits him in a wheelchair, his lips flapping around his gaping, toothless mouth. She places a blanket over his knees, tightens a sock hat on his head, and rolls him to the rendezvous point in the garden to meet her friends, each with their own elderly invalid. They line them up in a circle of silent, stuffed people, all facing one another, urine bags hanging beside their wheelchairs, while Vivie and her friends sit on the benches, chattering in their foreign language.  At six thirty she comes back to give me a bath.

From the porch, I see how she stretches her small, slender body and waves her raven-black straight hair, marching expeditiously. She doesn’t look back because she has a work permit she keeps in a waist pouch under her clothes. Close to the body.

“What do you need to get up for?” My husband asks. He is wearing his uniform, attaching the police pager to his belt, along with his cellphone and handcuffs. He shoves the gun into his pants.

**I remember. I found shelter from the rain under the crown of the tree. I stood under the weeping leaves for long moments, shrouded by a veil of drops. I listened to the swaying movements of the branches whispering above.**

I stretch my body, just a tiny, teeny bit, pressing my fingers, swollen like risen bread dough, into the mattress imprinted with my shape and sunken at the point at which I bleed. I raise myself up and kneel in bed, on all fours, like a heavy, obese bitch, then I reach out a hand to the window and open the shutter.

A cold wind blows in. I return to lie on my back inside the body-shaped depression in my bed. Alert. I send a hand between my legs to check if the blood is trickling and cringe when I discover it isn’t.

The house-call doctor comes to scold me. I promise not to move, not to move. “You mustn’t get up,” he says. “Except for ten minutes at noon.”

A walk around the living room. Vivie holds my hand tight. She is adept in holding those that can barely walk, knows she must lead them along the shortest possible infinite route, in circles, on wheelchairs down the path, from bench to bench, from bedroom to living room, slowly, slowly.

**I remember a truck with mud-splattered wheels, driving slowly past me. I clung to the trunk and watched. A woman in a green dress, her hair black and long. It covered her back. She knelt over a wooden casket. I remember a procession of black-clad men and women following the truck, the men leading the way in silence, the women following closely, weeping, screaming, beating their chests with their fists. I remember the wailing and screaming drifting away.**

We pay him, so he comes. My husband, panting, puts the bed up on its side. Then he turns and rotates it, trying to find an angle that will allow him to move it from the bedroom to the living room. Goddamn it, let him just come and do his work without any big ideas about how to furnish the house. He wipes his sweaty forehead with his hand. No use, the bed won’t come out this way. He needs to dismantle it, screw-by-screw, then put it together in the living room.

Until he finds the time to dismantle the bed, he drags the mattress alone from the bedroom, pushing it with his large, bear-like hands. “But if now the mattress is in the living room, you’ll stop getting up, then it will be worth my while to sleep on the folding bed as if I was in boot camp. No, don’t get up, that’s the last thing I need, you get up now.”

My husband wrestles with the double mattress, stained with the marks of a relationship. He barely manages to squeeze it through the corridor and drops it on the floor with a muffled thud.

“That’s it,” he says. “Now you have nothing to get up for at all.”

 “The house-call doctor charges three-hundred and fifty per visit. In this country, only private healthcare offers you proper treatment,” my husband tells me, although they could have charged less for placing a monitor on my belly. It pays off for him to place the mattress in the middle of the living room, in front of the porch’s large sliding door, to the right of the television. And I won’t need to move my hands, or head, or belly, until Vivie returns from  Pops.

“There,” he says. “Now you can lie down without moving. Not even a muscle, you hear? Tomorrow I’ll put the bed together and we’re done.”

Then he goes, leaving me sprawled on the mattress, wallowing in his concern, observing how, in the corner of the living room, where the wall meets the ceiling, an old spider is spinning her webs on the spindle of her body.  She has been here for long days, un-banished by a swing of the duster brush. Circle by circle she spins a fine net, like thin patches placed over my watching eye.

A distant shifting of clouds ruffles the air. The Earth yields to the movement of the sky and convulses, rattling the foundations of the building, the cars, the sidewalk, the rubber flooring in the kindergartens that whiffs of tar in the summers. At seven in the evening, after my walk around the house, Vivie bundles my hair into a knot and takes me to the shower.

“All right – all right,” she tells me.

“All right,” I answer.

“Okeydokey,” she says.

She soaps my back, scrubbing all the places I can’t reach. Silently, I look at my large white breasts resting on my belly, like two Beluga whales stranded on a beach. Lower down, I see two swollen legs now covered with white scented foam. How ugly I have become.

**I remember. I was walking barefoot along the bed of a shallow stream that led all the way to the forest. The stream gave onto a small natural pool. I placed my feet in it, then removed my dress and, with a quick movement, hurled it to the bank beside the pool. I sat in the water.**

 “Air, I have no air,” I tell my husband. “Open the porch.”

“It’s winter in Jerusalem, do you want to catch pneumonia?”

I wait until he leaves for his night shift, then open it myself. The rustle of the coming storm blows into my face. A single jackal howls as hard as it possibly can. The wind carries the miserable howling to my ears, the scent of its moist fur and its warm breath to my nostrils. The neighbor’s dog barks at the top of her lungs. The neighbor has gone to work and locked her up in the house because of the cold weather, but she has sensed the wind and, in her agitation, has knocked over an alarm clock that rings loudly until its battery runs out. The neighbor will beat her with his belt when he finds out she has scratched the door with her paws.

I sit and the mattress sways under me like muddy soil. The closets in the house are creaking; someone is dragging a chair across the floor; a woman’s high heels sound like muted gunfire as she walks. The lights in the neighbors’ houses go off one by one. A crying baby. I get up**.**One step, two steps, three. I make it to the armchair and sit down, filling the chair with my body. I pull the lever, popping up the leg rest.

My pulse knocks against my temples. My breath quickens, my hand extends towards the phone, but I draw it back. There’s no one. The drape hovers like a ghost. There’s no one… I begin to cough. I take a deep breath. The house-call doctor has taught me to count to ten. My breasts sway from side to side, rubbing against my arms in a waltz of vibrating flesh.

**I remember. Clear and quiet water surrounded me, there were little pebbles, smooth, round. I slid them down my cheek.  Naked, I emerged from the stream and sat by the pool, dipping my feet in the water, patches of light shortened and elongated and sparkled, the skin on the soles of my feet wrinkled.**

“I think,” I said to Doron, “that there are wolves in the mountains. And no, it isn’t Zoe.”

“No, there aren’t any wolves here,” says Doron. “What are you blubbering about?”

He sits in his uniform. A cup of black coffee is placed on the little table in front of him. His smoking-trained hand sketches empty gestures in the air. Desperate, he picks a cigarette from a packet, strokes it from tip to filter with a yearning finger, narrows his mouth, sucks in the void.

“What a night I’ve had,” he says, then inspects the sheet, seeking blotches.

**I remember. I had risen from the water and piled the stones into a little mound. I remember. A white blotch flickered among the trees. The tip of a tail appeared and vanished. I held my breath. I heard soft footsteps. I looked into the forest.**

Black ants climb from the garden up to the pipes and into the house. From the mattress, close to the floor, I see them, a little convoy, parading out of the crevice between the wall and the panels, marching to the kitchen, invading my house. I rise and drag myself to the kitchen. I take a deadly spray from under the sink. Seven steps from the kitchen. I tower over the ants in the spread-legged posture of a landlady. I raise the can and spray. I close the windows so the insecticide will thoroughly soak in, so they won’t come back. From the pains of her body, the spider is still spinning her webs. And through the threads, she watches me closing my eyes. She continues to circle over me in her own orbit.

“Are you insane?” My husband screams. “Do you want to kill the child?”  He forces Vivie to wash the insecticide off my body and calls the house-call doctor.

“Everything is fine,” he says. “But do me a favor, baby, lay off the chemicals. Really, I don’t understand what is going through your head. Are you all right?”

**I remember. From inside the rim of the forest, a beautiful white wolf returned my gaze, his eyes two clear crystals, his tail erect. “Don’t run away,” I whispered. I remember how, completely naked, wet and dripping with water, I approached. “Don’t run away.” He was almost the same height as me. His nose quivered. I stretched out a hand, almost feeling the soft touch of his fur. Suddenly he trembled, turned and disappeared into the thicket.**

“Vivie,” I tell her, “you can leave early today. It’s okay. A storm is coming.” Vivie looks at me in silence, and I return the exact same gaze. “Go, go to Pops. It’ll start raining soon. You don’t want to be caught in the storm.”

The wind howls, the building quivers. I guess they haven’t properly secured all the fixtures and connectors, nor did they anchor the foundations to the ground when it was being built.

I get up and open the window wide. I reach out with a heavy foot to pin it to the floor. The wind whistles, entering the living room through the porch. It ruffles the bedding on the mattress. Zoe barks at the top of her lungs.

From the darkness of noon, howls rise from the bottom of the earth. There, inside the asphalt plated earth, in a place where no roots can reach, and only the void exists, is the wolf. Here, he rises from his crouch, shaking the dirt from his fur and howling as loudly as he can. And the howl rattles the foundations of the building and shakes the city above him. The city that swallows his howls and forces him back inside it time and again, so he won’t be seen, or heard, so he won’t frighten anyone. But he calls to the wind and waits for the storm. He stretches his body and digs with his paws, as hard as he can, the way out. And on his way, he spreads open the building above, gaping chasms into the roads.

“A wolf!” I cry. Yet no one can hear my voice. Zoe’s barks dance about me like wild witches. I open the porch door wide, the wind ruffles my hair, the rain wets my face. I sense drops of blood trickling between my legs, mingling with the rainwater wetting my clothes.

“A wolf!” I cry to the wind, looking down into the pits dug by the wolf as he emerged from the earth. Then I place a hand on my belly. The baby moves. The spider quivers on her webs in the cold wind.

“Come,” she says. “Come, hold on to the webs.”