

Death of Popeye

Shana Penn

He doesn't go away. His movements make me dizzy. The circular rhythms grow hypnotic and weaken the grip of my muscles. They shake me loose, unanchor me. My will to be concealed unravels.

I am three-and-a-half years old. Trapped beneath hungry gyrations. Suddenly I am wise beyond my years, beyond my choice to kick. I am frightened. Should I forget?

I know this boy. A neighborhood teenager. Oily complexion. He never played with the other kids on the block. I hear my mother remind me, "Be nice to the baby-sitter."

Wet, mute lips lick my nape. Fog sweeps down my neck. His weight crushes my spine. I am pushed into the crisp, white sheets, forced through the springs and cotton fluff of the mattress, squashed between bed and floor. Nerve endings retreat from the interior walls of my skin to dodge his touch. I slither and slide across muscle, tissue, pumping blood. Where am I going? A crack or hole, I must escape.

Earlier that night he followed me around the house and watched me play my favorite game: Popeye Shipwrecked on a Desert Island. In the living room I find shelter from a storm under the glass coffee table. I crawl on hands and knees between green paisley chairs and floor lamps, and scour the island for spinach. Spinach will give me strength to rebuild my boat. Climbing a hillside covered with poppies and dandelions, up the steps from the foyer to the second floor, I spot leafy greens. Noisily I munch my fill, then stand erect, facing west, to await transformation from sailor-man to Superman. My body begins to swell, veins pop out, thighs throb. Muscles of a weight lifter ripple through my blouse and shorts. I explode into superhuman dimensions and torpedo through the house, unleashing a whirlwind that magically repairs my boat. Seconds later, I set sail from the top of the staircase. The ocean waves are choppy. I bump down the steps on my behind. Home to Olive Oyl.

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The entire evening I play and he watches. Occasionally I feel his eyes on my body. "Want to play?" I ask. He shakes his head no. My brother Andy would have raced me up the stairs to gobble down the spinach. He would have held me and reassured me, told me not to be afraid during the storm. This boy just watches. He hardly speaks at all. Eventually I exhaust myself, and he tells me it is time for bed. Later that night he wakes me to his own game.

He doesn't have a sister. He doesn't know how to play. I hide under a pillow and crawl into a clenched fist. A coward, feigning sleep. In the silence of his motions, I wait for him to leave my body, my bedroom, my space. Not once do I speak. Nor do I open my eyes. I am abandoned to a task I never asked for.

I wake up burdened. Bruised with memory, the weight of his body, the silence of my room. It is Sunday morning. Everyone is home. I hear my brothers rolling around on the living room floor. Down the hallway, the television



is playing in my parents' bedroom.

I could be watching Popeye.

Rising from my bed, I inch down the hallway to my parents' bedroom. Reaching through shadows, I gather my will into knuckles that tap at their door.

My parents are reading the Sunday paper. I shuffle about awkwardly. The gray-blue carpet swallows my knees. I am treading in gray-blue carpet. My voice is a scant flutter of light across shadows.

"Mommy, Daddy, I don't like the baby-sitter. He hurt me."

My father raises his eyebrows and for one brief moment looks at me. He clears his throat and continues to read the paper. My mother glances at him, then leans toward me. Her newspaper section collapses between us.

"What did he do to you?" she asks.

"He hugged me," I mumble from the foot of the bed.

Her eyes tug at me. My throat caves in. Why doesn't she hold me? Why doesn't he say something?

My father swallows his breath and flips through the pages. His legs press into the bedding. My mother looks at my father.

"Don't worry," she says. "We won't let him baby-sit again." I hear her tell me to run downstairs and play with my brothers.

I retreat to the doorway. My mother and father return to reading. Emptied ice cream bowls are stacked on the

night table. Bathrobes are draped over a gray stuffed chair. My father yawns. My mother sighs. The bedroom starts to fade. Tears blur my vision, remain planted in my eyes. I am scared to hold myself.

I descend the hallway stairs one by one past last night's hill of spinach. I return, a castaway, to my desert island. My brothers are wrestling in the living room. Their heads bob up from the floor behind the sofa.

*In the silence of his motions, I wait
for him to leave my body, my
bedroom, my space. I am abandoned
to a task I never asked for.*

Grinning monkeys. They taunt me to join them. I smile weakly. If I play with them, I'll wind up with a busted lip or bruised behind. Not today. I am Olive Oyl, stuck in an empty can of spinach. No one knows that I am lost.

I climb upstairs to my bedroom, stand tiptoe on the desk chair, and raise choice onto the highest shelf. Squeezed among the books, trolls, and trinkets. One day I'll huff and puff and blow the lid off this can of spinach. Choice will leap off the shelf and sink into my arms. □

Gaza

Rachel Tzvia Back

I

After the final heave, house collapsing
in and all the prayers that had held
the ceiling up for years rushing
through dust with a low moan
but leaving, you have seen her
sifting through the rubble,
sandaled foot striking an iron
bedframe, splintered picture
of a prophet's resting place.
With no tears you have seen her,
dry like stone, like tile, and alone.

Then understand the Law as I did not:
we tore the house down and she may not rebuild
there or elsewhere. *Her kitchen smelled of zatar
and of bread.* She will have no home here, no home.

II

Consider the prayers' desertion and our faith
crushed where it had been tucked neatly
between headscarves in the top drawer
even as our walls still stand:

there is no believing now.

*There are only children in the alleys,
their blood darkening the dirt.*

After the rains, this mound will settle,
sink into itself and forget what it was.

But she, who salvaged
herself, will not forget.

This you cannot see, but listen:
how the storm rises, and the hills
move closer to the river.