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Deeds of Love and Rage

We are a troubled family. Ephraim left three months ago and Cecilia and I have had to confront each other like enemies who suddenly find themselves at the same party. Yesterday we quarreled and today, dressed in a pair of faded blue denim shorts and a yellow T-shirt that says "Foxy" in flowery iridescent letters, she moves through the house sulking. She is the only thing in motion on this hot sultry day.

My only child. . . . Her dark uncombed hair straggles around a thin face and sad thirteen-year-old eyes swollen from lack of sleep. Last night through the flimsy walls of our apartment, I heard her weeping, and this morning her whole face slumps in sorrow and rage. It is all my fault. I can see it in the frown that bridges her forehead. If only I would make concessions, try harder, her father would come back. And so we are doomed to this summer that continues to stretch endlessly before us, a time that hardly seems to be real at all but just a series of minutes, hours, days to be gotten through and endured together. How we have begun to dislike each other. By the end of summer Ephraim and I shall come to a decision for the sake of the child, but now we are still wavering back and forth. Yes, I can tell from the way her black eyes glow with a fierce fury: She is as tired of me as I am of her.

At the beginning of June Ephraim packed up his bags and took an apartment and a job on the other side of the city. He does not have enough space, he says. How foreign that word sounds on his tongue. We had begun to chip each other into little bits and pieces. Ephraim will not admit it, but sometimes I think it was the strain of the child.

As a baby she was perpetually restless and moody. She came into the world too soon, bounding feet first from the womb. I had nothing prepared. No, not even her name. I had to snatch that also without thought. She cried day and night, refusing any of the usual things, and Ephraim and I would take turns rising from our sleep, moaning with fatigue, too tired to comfort each other for this strange being who had taken over our lives.

Thirteen years and still she remains a puzzle to me, her moods flashing back and forth, a mood for every moment of the day. A look, a remark, or some dark demon within can change her in an instant. I was too old to have her. Yes, I am certain it must be that. But Ephraim is a religious man. He used to say that suffering cleanses the soul, that burdens are to be borne.

"It is a sign," he said then, clasping his heavy hands together, closing and unfolding them nervously, considering it. To Ephraim there is a purpose in the world that escapes me. There are things that we are not supposed to understand. He prefers the difficult to the simple, certain that God is testing him. He was not an easy man to live with.

This morning when Cecilia asks if her father is coming for the Sabbath, which begins at sundown, I tell her that it is hopeless.

"Your father is impossible," I blurt out in a weak moment, saying it passionately, throwing up my hands in a gesture of despair. I can hear my voice rising unpleasantly, and as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I am sorry. But it is already too late.

She turns on me. "Bitch," she says without a sound, mouthing the letters with her lips. At first I ignore her. It is far too hot to respond, to become embroiled in another one of these arguments. Anyhow, what would be the use? Let her vent her wrath on me. Let her get it out of her system, think that her father's absence is my fault. What harm can it do? But then she says it again, and this time she whispers it, but loudly enough to hear the ugly sound reverberate in the room.

"Bitch," she says a third time, growing bolder. The word explodes from her mouth, chilling me to the bone although the sun is seeping resolutely through the drapes and the room is sweltering with the heat.

"Bitch," she says again and again, unable to stop, her face contorted with rage. I feel my heart beating faster within the cage of my body, fluttering against the armor of my bones, and rising, I slap her face, so hard that it stings my hand and leaves an ugly red mark on her skin.

She runs to her room and the door slams shut. I can hear the click of her lock snapping closed, then loud sobs as she gasps for breath. I imagine her flung sideways across her bed, her hair falling wildly over the edge, beating the pillow with her tight closed fists and suddenly I am filled with pity for her and shame for myself.

Through the long hours of the morning she remains in retreat and will not come out. Finally I pound on the door and order her to open it, but the only sound is the steady whirring of a fan. Frightened that she has done something rash, racked with guilt that I have lost control, I take a hanger and, bending it, work diligently at the keyhole until at last I swing open the door.

She has stopped crying but her face is splotched with red and there is still an angry imprint where my hand crossed her cheek. She is pouting on the bed, her eyes puffy, her lower lip thrust forward. She will not even look at me. The curtains are drawn against the heat and in the dim shadowed light of the room I see

that she has strewn candy wrappers over the floor. An empty Coke bottle sprawls on its side against the dresser. A lonely sock protrudes beneath the bed. A trail of dirty clothes trace a path through the room and end in a corner next to stacks of *True Confession* magazines littering the rug.

"Come out," I say as calmly as I am able, swallowing hard for what we have done to each other, what we continue to do. "We'll make up. Everything will be all right." I try to appear more confident than I really am. "You're only hurting yourself, you know." The words sound as hollow and meaningless as when my own mother uttered them, and I am aware that this sort of logic will never reach her.

"Look," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "It has nothing to do with you." I keep my eyes fixed firmly on her face although she continues to stare stubbornly at the floor. "It's between your father and me."

At last she lifts heavy lids to look up defiantly. A difficult age, I think, and she is more difficult than most. Beneath that yellow T-shirt with the ludicrous letters, her breasts rise as supple as ripe fruit. Under her arms I see black prickly hair sprouting like desert scrub. She will not let me see her naked anymore. Once I came into the room, catching her by surprise, and saw with a shock that triangle of womanly hair on her body. Now we stare at each other without speaking. Suddenly overcome with remorse, I long to tell her that I am sorry but the moment passes and instead I say nothing. I retreat and she rises mournfully to take a shower.

When I hear the water running full force, I decide to call Ephraim. He is an engineer, capable of correcting the errors of vast machinery. Perhaps it is still possible for him to correct the errors of our lives. I dial his number at work and he answers the phone himself, startling me, as though he has been standing there all along, arms crossed over his chest in a familiar posture, waiting for me to call.

"Ephraim," I begin, without bothering to ask how he is, "come home tonight. We are eating each other alive."

"On Sunday," he says wearily, for we have been through this

before. Ephraim refuses to come on Friday for Shabbes. It is too far he says. He is afraid that something will happen before he gets here and he will have to travel after sundown when it is forbidden. A thousand and one disasters pass through his mind. The car will stall and leave him stranded. A train could have an accident, God forbid. A bus could be hijacked on the highway (he has read of it happening), and he will be caught as night falls and the Sabbath descends without a prayer to stand on.

"Too late," I say. "By Sunday we'll both be dead."

"Don't worry," he answers solemnly as though he hasn't even heard me. "I will pray for us." Suddenly I can see him standing in the fading light, his prayer shawl draped over his shoulders, a skullcap on his balding dome—at dawn, at dusk, in heat or cold, swaying and rocking on the balls of his feet, summoning the God of Israel, communing with his Maker. He is in the wrong century, I think, the wrong life. He should have been Abraham journeying beneath a starry sky, Moses adrift in the wilderness, Jeremiah making his lonely vigil through the desolate city of Jerusalem.

"Ephraim, Ephraim," I plead, desperation overtaking my voice. "Live a little! Take a chance. What harm can it do?" But he is older, more set in his ways. I can hear him sighing and struggling with himself.

"Yes, I'll pray," he repeats again, but he sounds exhausted, as though what is happening to us is all too much for him.

"What good will your prayers do? What good is your God?" I cry, aware that I am beginning to descend over the edge. Then I decide on another tactic and this time my voice is softer, cajoling, "Come home, Ephraim," I say, "I need you. I want you."

I can almost hear the catch in his voice, the hesitation as he thinks it through.

"For the child, Ephraim," I persist.

"It is too difficult," he murmurs at last.

"Ah, Ephraim," I say, "*life* is difficult," but he has made up his mind. He is firm, refusing to commit himself. "For shame," I cry, and slam down the phone.

Tonight, tomorrow he will not even answer it. Once I let the phone ring a hundred times just to test him, knowing that he was there, swaying silently in the dark. Cecilia calls him late at night when she thinks I am asleep. I can hear her whispering about me, telling him how hard it is for us to get along, how she wishes he would come back. Now, hearing footsteps, I wonder if she has been standing there all along. I turn on the tap and quickly splash my burning face with cold water. But even so I can feel myself flushing as though she has caught me in a disreputable act. Her eyes are red and rimmed with fatigue but she has changed her clothes, and clipped her wet hair back from her forehead. Yet the place where I struck her continues to stain her cheek, forming a barrier between us. She says nothing, her face an impassive mask. Perhaps she has not heard anything after all and it is only my imagination which tortures me.

"Come," I say, trying to make the best of a bad day. "It's time to get ready for Shabbes." Before the sun sets we must clean the house, polish the silver, cook the dinner and bake the bread. In these matters Ephraim has trained her well. She obeys me silently, without a word of complaint. I uncover the dough that we prepared earlier, and we take out the bread tray and the silver candlesticks that need polishing. On the shelf next to them a sad solitary imprint marks the spot where Ephraim's wine cup stood.

She places a board on the kitchen table and her fingers move deftly over the dough, pounding and kneading it into shape, her face coloring with the heat, her eyes intent on her task. At last she twists it into thick braids to slip into the oven, pinching off a piece which she burns in an ancient ritual, closing her eyes and moving her lips in silent supplication as she has seen me do. What does she yearn for behind those sorrowful eyes? What thoughts does she think? For the past year she has suffered with nightmares that wake her up screaming in the middle of the night, as though striving to be released from some dread torment that will not leave her alone. In the morning when I come into her room I see her sheets twisted into knots, as though demons have tied them during the night.

"A stage," the doctor says, but I know better. She has always been this way. Now just more so. Sometimes I think that when I

am old and defenseless, unable to take care of myself, I will have to live with her and then she will vent her stored-up rage upon my helpless body like that dough beneath her hands.

I want to say, "Tell me what you're thinking, Cecilia," but she is far away, her gaze focusing on something else, caught in a web of her own thoughts.

Yesterday to calm us both I prepared a picnic supper to take to the park. Other families were there, too, and we spread a blanket on the grass and had cold slices of roast beef and potato salad. When the ice cream man came around we bought cherry Popsicles and sat at the edge of the playground to eat them. Children were swinging, and watching them, Cecilia decided to pump her own skinny legs high over the sand boxes, soaring higher and higher until her face was filled with a strange gentle joy. Afterward, she sat very close to me and laid her head upon my shoulder, her eyes tranquil, her expression subdued. But by evening it was obvious that she was brooding. We quarreled, and later I heard her crying until I finally turned over and fell asleep.

She is still working soundlessly as the heat builds to a peak of intensity and I pause to step outside on our small balcony, where we have some hanging plants that are rapidly wilting, and two old porch chairs that Ephraim keeps meaning to paint. We are on a quiet street at the very end of a cul-de-sac, and an occasional car, coming down here by mistake, will turn around beneath our porch. But now there is not a sign of life. Across the street windows are sleepy lids, blinds and drapes closed against the broiling sun. The heat is suffocating. From next door I hear the blast of a TV, then a muffled sound as it is quickly turned down. But it is not only the heat which suffocates me. It is the knowledge of what has become of the three of us, of what we are doing to each other.

When I go back into the house Cecilia is still intent on her tasks. She raises her head and looks at me suspiciously without saying anything. The kitchen has become unbearably hot, the sun pouring through the curtains onto the linoleum floor, the futile beating of a fan on top of the refrigerator the only noise that breaks the silence. I join her and we work side by side without uttering a word.

Beads of perspiration gather on her forehead and above her upper lip, and I wonder again what she is thinking behind those inscrutable eyes.

"Cecilia," I long to say. "Let's make up, let's not fight," but something holds me back. Her mouth is pursed tightly together, her jaw clenched, and I decide not to say anything.

Instead, I open the oven and take out the bread, setting it on the counter to cool. It is dark brown, the top of the braids blackened slightly at the tips, and she glances approvingly at it. For a moment she seems about to speak, but then stops as though pride still prevents her. I season the chicken and put it in to roast. The sun continues to splash across the kitchen in waves of heat. I stop to take a bath and nap before dinner, and still we have not spoken since morning.

When I appear an hour later I see that she has spread a white cloth upon the table and set out the best dishes and silver, placing the candlesticks in the center. Over the mound of fragrant bread is a green and gold embroidered cover Cecilia made one summer at camp with the word Sabbath in Hebrew. She has changed again, this time into a clean white blouse and white shorts, and her hair is tied back with a light blue ribbon. I am wearing a long print skirt and a colorful top I bought one year in Mexico, and my hair, which is beginning to thread with gray at the sides, is pinned on top of my head with a large tortoise-shell clip.

I turn off the fan and open the windows, drawing back the curtains. For the first time in days the heat has begun to break. A cool breeze stirs the material and they flutter lightly against the screens. Before the sun is ready to disappear behind the tops of the houses like an angry red eye, I light the candles and stand before them, arms upraised to say the blessing that ushers in the day of rest. Cecilia takes her place next to me and even though my eyes are closed I can feel her hands circling the air next to mine, drawing the Sabbath closer.

"A good Shabbes," I say, forcing myself to reach out and put my

arms around her shoulders, but her spine stiffens at my touch. Her body remains rigid and she averts her somber pupils from mine, her front teeth biting down hard on the middle of her lower lip.

I set the dinner on the table and then we both sit down, neither of us wanting to acknowledge Ephraim's empty place at the head of the table. Memory recalls his strong blunt hands above Cecilia's bowed head, intoning the patriarchal blessing that always brings such a strange quiet joy to her face.

In his absence I say a prayer of thanksgiving over the bread, breaking it apart with my hands, and then we eat it in thick chunks, greedily, suddenly ravenous.

"It's good," I say. "*Very* good," and she blushes with the praise, her tan cheeks turning rosy beneath the surface.

"Do you really think so?" she asks, and her expression changes as she speaks to me for the first time since morning. "You're not just saying that?"

"No. Really. It's good," I say again and I can see that she is pleased. A slight smile passes over her lips and like soldiers on a battlefield it is clear that we have decided to call a truce for the holiday.

But then, in spite of myself, I remark bitterly, "It's a pity your father couldn't be here to taste it."

For the second time that day I am sorry as soon as the words are out of my mouth. A look of pain crosses her face and her eyes linger longingly on the candles. "But he's coming Sunday, isn't he?" she asks intensely.

"Yes," I say. "Of course. On Sunday." I say it calmly this time to reassure her and perhaps myself as well. It seems to sustain the two of us, and we relax and begin to eat with relish. Gradually a strong breeze gathers outside and blows through the room, releasing us, and it appears that the weight of thirteen years does not rest as heavily on her shoulders. The muted light of the candles catches her features in an unexpected expression, and I am startled to see that it is Ephraim's face before me.

As we eat, lengthening shadows fall over the walls in ghostly shapes. Darkness enfolds us, broken only by the bright headlights flooding the living room when they come to the dead end of ou apartment.

Cecilia's brow is furrowed in concentration above the slende bridge of her nose. We make desultory talk and I think how fa away we are from each other. At last I set out two melons fo dessert and crushed grape ices that we spoon into the hollowe centers of the fruit.

We linger for a while longer, still not speaking, and then I clea off the table while she rises to help, thrusting her arms into the soapy dishwater.

She hands me the dishes and I dry them, placing them one by one on the white counter as we work silently, the light of the candles finally sputtering to a close. The smell of burnt wax fills the air. A full moon illuminates Cecilia's slight figure and I see that the red mark on her cheek is nearly gone.

When we finish I hang up the towel to dry and our glances meet as she turns to go. How fragile she looks, how young, I think, so that I yearn to cry out to her as she disappears into the hushed darkness of the hallway. I am filled with a rush of love for her. Flesh of my flesh. Bones of my bone. Then, as though she has read my mind, suddenly she returns and standing on her tiptoes, kisses me goodnight. "Mother, I'm sorry," she says, and then just as quickly she is gone.

On Sunday Ephraim will come and perhaps things will work out after all. Who knows? But for a while at least in the stillness of this moment there is peace. At last there is peace. And tomorrow or the next day anything seems possible now, anything at all.