

THE ESCAPE

by Aharon Appelfeld

The ruse worked well. After a month his features were no longer recognizable. Another, counterfeit face had been stamped upon him, so convincingly moulded one could easily have taken it for the work of nature itself. And the odor that seemed to accompany him was that of peasants who spend time with animals. A slow gait, feet that know the dust of footpaths. He had a horse, not an especially well groomed one but an ordinary, all-purpose workhorse. And together they made a comfortable pair, unseparated by any barrier of strangeness. He carried on his affairs in the villages, greeting and cursing as circumstances required.

He traded in salt, kerosene, turpentine, vodka--commodities that were in demand. He had no trouble picking up the others' movements and expressions, the fierceness of the bargaining and the placation that followed. So much one of them did he become that they ceased referring to him as the trader and began to speak of him by name. His grey hairs earned him respectful terms of address.

If he happened into town on a Sunday or feast day, he knew how to conduct himself the way they did. He sat in the tavern, went to church, stopped off at the shrine. The words came to him as if of their own accord.

All that had happened to him lay behind him like a yawning abyss. There was a strange excitement for him in this adjustment, an intoxication beyond fear. His movements were untrammelled, and as a result he made a better peasant than the pea-

sants themselves. He knew how to talk to respectable householders, to the village mayor, to the priest; how to narrow his gaze when a buxom lass came into the tavern.

But elsewhere--in the meadows, in the places where water roared--he would unharness the horse and his whole life would come back to him. He knew: it was the cowardice inside him that had brought him to a halt. The evil shadow clung to his flesh. Sometimes the horse would have to bear the brunt of it. He would beat the animal the way a Jew beats a dog. Yet he knew in his heart that it was not from the horse that he had gotten this smell of goats and butter, but, as it were, from within. The body knows how to protect itself by the lowliest of means, even to the point of emitting odors. Sometimes he would take grass and hide his face in shame. Praying, he would whisper torn verses. His Jewishness lay next to him like fallen leaves beside a tree. It withered in his hand, and within him. He lost the gnawing sorrow too. Awareness was not enough to burn away his madness.

The waters of the stream would show him his face, the peasant face blotched by the sun. He would stand gazing at it. Now and then he would laugh.

Sometimes out of weariness he would linger in the open fields. He would stretch out on the ground, trying to rekindle his memory. His life receded further and further into the distance, leaving no residue within him. His dreams were a strange mixture of crude, amorphous figures: heaven and hell, angels and devils.

He heard tell in the tavern about the heroic deeds of Yaroslav's army. But the actions themselves, the material artifacts, spoke most loudly of all. The looted property found its

way quickly into the homes of the peasants, lost its Jewish coloring, and flowered on the sideboards.

He was attached to the horse as though it were an extension of his own body. He walked with it, slept with it. And the horse gave him in return what a domesticated animal can give a man: broad shoulders, a wise step, a look.

He didn't know how this total transformation had come over him. He hadn't made any special effort to learn the others' ways or take on their expressions--these things seemed to flow of their own accord. He knew how to eat as they did, how to cross himself. As if he had actually been a peasant.

And so a year went by. The spasms of memory were not strong enough to upset his equilibrium. The latter he drew from some internal source, and it cast up a mighty dam within him--like those peasants who take their strength from the harsh air.

Yaroslav's forces advanced. His raids were no longer discussed. Other matters occupied the center of attention: village notables, landowners, tenants; scandal, larceny, and theft. The villagers no longer spoke of the Jews either. They had disappeared completely from the area, leaving behind a few words that, in garbled form, became part of the vernacular. His own thoughts stayed close to home, focussed on his immediate needs: the things he himself required, never mind profit. He learned to enjoy the rustic vodka, to drink himself into a stupor and sleep the whole day, to bathe with his horse in the river.

It did not occur to any of the villagers that he might be a stranger. He resembled them in every way. But there were times when a distant melody would, as if out of spite, well up inside

him, seemingly wrenched out of his innards. It always happened during some kind of lull, in a place where one didn't expect to hear ghostly voices. He would stand there, trapped in his own toils.

And the summer came. The silence grew clear. A dark tranquility stretched out over the night. He would make his way along on horseback, ^{staggering} as if against a current. From time to time, he would make camp, the horse at his side, the sounds of the forest streaming to his ears. He felt at home in the forest, as though he had never heard of robbers, wolves, or bears.

But more than anything else he loved the company of the peasants: talking with them, getting drunk.

Then, with time, he had a chance encounter. A young man was standing there in the woods. Even from a distance his Jewish features were discernible, as if he were no youth at all but the specter of fear itself. He dismounted and called out, but the boy fled, breathless and stumbling. Mounting his horse, he set off in pursuit. The boy disappeared. He peered sharply, like a hunter. There was no human sound, only the melody of the forest.

Fruit ripened: cherries, plums, the first harvest. Sometimes weariness would overtake him en route. He would sleep outdoors in the perfumed air. And it was thus that the first feelings came over him. By turns, he would pay heed to them and brush them off. The summer here is full of feelings. As the peasants say, "Beware of the song of the birds, lest it lull you into laziness."

The Jewish houses must have been overgrown with weeds by this time, their roofs caved in, the common enclosure merged with the abandoned fields. Only here and there, like a last whisper,

did a forgotten door swing on its hinges, a blind window. These too accumulated dust, taking on the hue of the soil.

But sometimes it was a real whisper: the hem of a shabby garment, a hand, a head, so alive and unghostlike that he saw them before his very eyes once again in all their fearfulness: their wares on their backs and their clothing tied up, like scouts sent out after a flood; their steps restrained as if this were not soil at all but a field of hissing coals; stooped and scurrying, like magnified beetles in whose eyes fear flashes like phosphorus.

He would rein in his horse and study them. He could reach them with a single gallop, as a hunter might. But he stood gazing, frozen in the sea of wheat that was turning golden. They would cringe, pausing in their tracks, watching and listening intently. They crawled along only on the country paths, never venturing into the village. Sometimes he could clearly make out a man, a woman, a child. Crouching in the paths, they seemed like oversized estival creatures, driven from their lairs by the heat.

Now and then a stray dog or abandoned horse would leap out and pursue them. They would flee and disappear, like animals running off into burrows. The summer silence, that breathing patchwork of green and gold, would then return. It crossed his mind that unless he made himself known to them they would fly at him one day like irate summer insects, swarming over him in their final rage and biting his alien flesh.

At night the movement pressed onward with a muffled rustling. Man, woman, and child, they made their way along the narrow, weed-lined paths or sat conversing in the underbrush. Their voices were more familiar to him than his own. They passed him like shadows that he himself had cast. At times they were the voices of mer-

chants who had lost their businesses and whose imaginations were being inflamed by the pursuing night. The voices rang with emotion. By morning they had vanished into the field of golden grain. Summer breathed freely.

The summer made its demands. Stock ran out. He was on his way to replenish it at the barge depot. The peasants wanted salt, kerosene, sugar. Paths led down to the river. He was hemmed in by the standing grain, close to the breathing of the horse. The stillness rippled. Here and there a cross, the blue roof of a shrine--these too seemed part of the stifled silence. Near the river, a row of peasants stood cutting hay, brandishing their sickles with a broad stroke, like the blowing of the Angel of Death. He stopped to greet them.

His purchases went well, and he returned laden with crates. The horse plodded along at its own pace, and evening followed after them across the seemingly endless stretches of the meadow, the sheaves swaying in the wind. He too was caught up in this powerful rhythm. His mind wandered, farther than the soul can grasp.

As if from a camouflaged lair, a Jew stepped out into his path. He looked like a giant beetle that had lost its sense of direction. "Get the hell out of the way!" he shouted. And the Jew fell on all fours. His features were white and tortured, as though he had been pinned under a rock, gasping for breath. He seemed to have been crouched in hiding for days, the grain growing over him.

"Bread!" cried the Jew in a voice that had not been used for some time. He broke off half a loaf for him. The Jew stretched

out a white hand and disappeared like a snail into the forgiveness of the grass.

That night he didn't return to the village. He unloaded the crates by the stream and left the horse to graze. The obsequiousness of the Jew resounded in his ears.

That night the sounds became clearer and reached ^{his} ears with a naked lucidity. They were scattered nearby. If they came any closer, he would flee. They crouched in the grass, lapping water from the stream.

As the night deepened the words grew quieter, and a song arose. So soft was it that only one very nearby would notice it at all. The singing flowed all night long, like inner voices by which the singers alone were rocked to and fro. Then, with the crack of dawn, it faded away. The song of summer exulted now in the fields. He got ^{up} humble and submissive that morning, as if his dreams had plucked out his whiskers. His face trembled in the stream, trembled unshaded. The thought of revealing himself to the next Jew he met crossed his mind.

A gentle morning caressed the sheaves. Except for the tracks of animals, there were no footsteps. The trees stood silently by, the wild cherries reddening. The first wagons were being drawn up from the riverbank, laden with the harvest. They stopped to ask why he wasn't coming to the village. He had only stopped there for a moment, he replied. The wagons moved on, leaving ruts in the trampled mud. Only now, belatedly, did he notice how loose the soil was there, how the sheaves seemed almost planted in its crumbling surface. All day long he ambled about in the fields. It was a summer melody without a human voice.

Here and there a cow, a horse--they too creatures of this stillness--stood hemmed in by the grass.

At dusk he sat down to a meal with two peasants, tenant farmers from the south. They told him about their lives, the years they had spent working another man's land. Their voices had a certain subdued quality. They showed no outward sign of their enslavement, as if it were their natural condition.

The day's sights passed over him like gusts of wind.

An undisguised sorrow contorted the face of the horse, which seemed to sense that it no longer enjoyed the same affection from its master that it once had. It lay by the crates like a neglected pet. He brought water and gave it to drink.

The evening smoke rose from the chimneys of the village. The lowing of the cows and the voices of the peasants sounded to him like a demand: for salt, kerosene, sugar. But the voices did not frighten him; another, darker fear echoed within.

Slowly the blue of evening deepened, and the silence cleared. Once again, the old feelings crept over him. Merchants who had lost businesses and whose voices sounded like the clatter of coins, weaving plans for some commercial onslaught. Subdued voices.

Later there arose from the murky darkness the sound of little boys learning the Pentateuch. An old man was teaching them, Hebrew and translation alternating. A white hand thrust out of the brush and cupped water from the stream. He pulled himself up and the hand withdrew, leaving no shadow. Then the children resumed their chanting. The reading exuded a kind of longing, as if it were not rote study but prayer. Little by little the darkness exposed

itself. The first light of morning wrapped itself in blue. Three Jews lay in the high grass like a thick patch of darkness. left behind on the ground and shriveled up. They recoiled at the sight of him.

"Good morning," one of them mustered the courage to say, speaking in the language of the peasants. Their white faces were frozen with fear.

Silence hung rigid between them, the freezing shudder between hunter and hunted.

"Have mercy," said one of them, getting up on his hands and knees. Fear seemed to put words in his mouth. The black clothes hung loosely on them. They were exposed, like moles which an early-rising predator has taken by surprise.

"They took everything we had. We alone are left," the old man said, clutching the ground beneath him as if preparing to make some kind of sacrificial offering. All his movements together amounted to an expression of helplessness. The other two, who were evidently his sons, hovered at his side.

"I am one of you," he said in the gentile language. And that, coming like a soft blow, was so utterly unexpected that all the old man could do was to grin like a stammerer.

"What?" he said without moving. Experienced with traps and ambushes, he suddenly found himself exposed to the light of day, before a real live heathen.

The man put a hand over his brimming eyes. It had been a long time since the breath of a Jew had whispered in his ear, and it suddenly licked his face like a flame.

It had begun nearly a year before, he told them. Yaroslav's

cavalry had broken out like a summer storm, mowing down the villages. Noblemen shut themselves up in their castles; the monasteries demanded apostasy. He had been traveling when the storm hit. He bought himself a fur coat and a horse.

"And no one recognized you?" one of them asked, suddenly finding his voice.

"I walked in the villages and no one knew. I hardly recognized myself at first."

"How much you must have changed. There's no sign."

They drew near and sat down next to him. The riddle slowly unfolded for them.

"Sometimes fear can do it," said the old man, trying to console him. "You completely forgot."

"Had it not been for your voices."

"My son," the old man said. It was evident that he would have liked to bless him, to advise him, had it not been for his rough peasant appearance. He seemed like one of those who work as servants in Jewish households and learn a little of our language.

"And you?" he asked, suddenly stirred.

"We've been here. No one knows yet. The high grass gave us cover. Our feet froze during the winter. We can't go far. Maybe the summer will heal them. If it hadn't been for our feet, we'd have been caught by now. There was a manhunt. If it hadn't been for our feet.

"What are you going to do?"

The tip of the old man's nose trembled, a remnant of his fear.

"So that's how you were saved," the young one said. Astonishment lit up his eyes, the way it does with Jewish boys who hear tell of the wonders of the world. "And you can move about freely in the villages."

"Of course," the old man interjected. "He's a gentile, isn't he?"

He was a prisoner of their gaze.

"Maybe he had read forbidden books before that," said the young one, his emaciated face aglow with innocence. He was obviously very young.

"What a change! How can a man change so much?"

"The clothes did it, apparently," the older son tried to explain.

What could he have told them? He was trapped now in his own enigma. His language was a strange, unfused mixture of Jewish and gentile speech. Like non-Jews who have served in Jewish houses and picked up a few Jewish words.

"And you're not afraid?"

The initial silence returned to obstruct the space between them, a silence no words could fill. The old man studied him, the way one studies a gentile.

The older son managed to say, "You're past the barricade now. They won't chase you any more."

The man did not look up. Their presence was hard for him to bear. He was ready to give them his horse and his supplies if only they would go away and leave him alone. But, like fugitives who have found a kindred spirit and don't want to let go of him, they didn't budge.

The old man asked questions about the village, the way practical men do. He asked ⁴⁵ if it were possible for them simply to get up and go. It was not his weakness which spoke, but a whisper of superhuman strength.

A kind of estrangement came between them now. "I'm giving you clothing and the horse. You can go to the villages and do business."

"But what about the dogs?" the old man said.

"Are you afraid of them? The only dogs left are those that were here before Yaroslav. The others have been taken away. Even the cows have."

Then the older one spoke to him. He used their own language. Evening had already descended upon them, and this was the boundary. While they were wrapped up in their prayers, he sat like a defendant in the shadow of the cherry tree, visible in the twilight, apart.

"Let's go," the old man said, using the expression Jews use when the evening devotions are done. And they studied him as Jews study a gentile. He wanted to tell them something Jewish, but it came out gentile. Finally he began cursing his own tongue, in the way gentiles curse. "Don't you want the horse? It is a horse, after all," he said, speaking the way drunkards do when they offer other men their wives. They began to be afraid of him. No sooner was it dark than they made off, like nocturnal creatures who suck energy from the darkness. The grass suddenly lost its black spots and shone smooth and green once more.

That night, the forest was bathed in moonlight. The horse plodded slowly along, part and parcel of the chill breathing of

the woods. An alien sweat warmed him. He sensed that, unwittingly, he had shed some part of his body. The horse bore him along, but in its gait too there was an unaccustomed lightness, as if it were trying to fly. The saddle was pulled tight. The horse lifted its feet as if preparing for some other, steadier movement. So well-balanced was its flight that it seemed to glide just above the ground without ever touching it.

translated from
the Hebrew by
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