

The Flute

I DON'T LISTEN. Whatever it is they say, I nod and look, but I don't listen. And I have worked twenty-five years in the school not two miles from here. I walk out that door in the morning, I work till four, come back, go to sleep and I have managed not to know things about my next-door neighbor. A friend of mine, Magda, asked: "Didn't you know that? *Everybody* knows that." I said, "I didn't." I do not know their games or what they want hidden. I go home to myself at night and I don't listen. Maybe because I don't eat lunch here.

That's my son Joel in the lane, walking like he's got all day. He's a good boy. Got three daughters of his own. Says they're more trouble to run than cows because they listen, but the cows don't *talk*. He runs the cow shed. I tell him the cows have a lot to be said for them as colleagues. I never met a cow who learned to bite. And I go down to visit him sometimes.

One thing I'm sorry for is I was obedient. It was when my Joel was small, before he took over the milking. I taught him the flute, by myself. He was good. Nine years old. Skinny legs, standing there tooting. Such a beautiful sound, like the wind over the date trees. And the women came, one by one. First they came in the laundry. You know when you throw your clothes in the wash, just before Sabbath, at the big drums, you can't go anywhere. This one would stand next to me, sorting her whites from her coloreds—throwing them in the bins—and say, "My Yosl is not like your Joel. He's not lucky. Nobody can teach him flute. He'll never get to be *musical*." She folded her sack of clothes, now empty, and walked away.

One by one, every one of them. At the laundry, the nurse's waiting room, the line for tchulent on Friday night. I didn't listen. Eventually a big one—one of my friends, Magda—came leading a delegation. She was the one in the hospital with me after I came from Bergen-Belsen. She was the one in the next bed, as we listened together to the first bird song. When the ice thawed, you could hear birdsong; in the Spring, we sat on our hospital beds together, mid-morning, and nearly cried. She cried, I nearly cried. When Tzvi, my husband, first came to the hospital to visit me, I didn't know yet he would be my husband. This girl, Magda, when he left, she turned to me and she said, "Wo ho!"

She came to my door one day. I was home sick, I hadn't gone to teach, with all the listening to women moaning. She came to my door and she said, "You have to stop teaching him."

"Not you too," I said, "Magda."

She said, "It's not equitable. He will have an extra chance. An unfair advantage. Why can't you teach them all?"

I threw my hands up. "Why teach a child, who can't play, the flute? Why not try to get the goats to drive the tractor?"

"You always had such a smart mouth," she said. "Everybody is musical. Everybody likes a good song."

"Some can't carry a song in a bucket."

"Don't teach anyone," she said, "if you're elitist. So he won't play the flute. What's the loss? Do we have a concert hall?"

"I like to hear him play."

"All kids should play. If they can't, better he shouldn't. What is it, another hour a day you can devote to books?"

(Back then, I didn't have my doctorate. She wouldn't talk to me like that today. Eventually the kibbutz let me go study. When I was fifty eight.)

"I like the sound of the song, Magda. Don't you remember? How important a song could be? How important a song was over the ice cracking?"

"Again with the ice," she said, "We live in the desert. If he plays the flute you won't get peace. I promise you. My child will never be on any stage. And I can't see why yours should be. He belongs out here. On this sand. Doesn't he?"

"Is that all he can be out here, silent?"

"He can listen to the same songs we heard. Did you have a violin, in the camps?"

"We are not in the camps."

"Then teach everyone."

WHEN HE WAS SMALL he went, sometimes, down to the cowshed. And he would play his flute at the cows; some said it made them give more milk. Now he milks the cows. He's so calm. He says he knows just who's been milking the cows ahead of him when he goes in to milk, at noon or four in the morning. He really has a touch, my son. His hands touch them below, on the udders, and the cows calm down, right away. They never kick him. He used to have that touch with the flute but then he stopped playing and he never went back. I miss the sound of him going down the path in the pouring rain. Playing his little pipe, coming back soaked to the skin saying, "Ma! A calf was born! My flute was the first thing it heard after his mother groaning. I played for the boys, like this, listen!"

It's so easy to stop something. So easy. But the music of the ice when it breaks is not silence. It howls in the wind. And sometimes I see my son go past our window. Going down to the sheds at night when it's long before time for milking, or when it isn't even his turn. He's going to listen out to the sound of the flute over the milk churns. You can hear it if you listen hard or your hand burns in the cold

at four in the morning; you can hear the sound of a boy who is no longer playing, and it's the sound of the cows before they have been milked. They cry and Joel goes to calm them.

Once I asked if he'd like to take it up again—he must have been thirty. Already in charge of the cowshed. He thought for a moment and said, “Ma, what's over isn't there anymore.” And I saw his eyes full of all those women, throwing white clothes into hampers. And I'm glad I never heard their words, or know their secrets. I'm glad I don't see their faces. Just the linens falling over the netting at the bottom of my baby carriage.

When I go sometimes, to the dairy—to visit him—I see the names and faces of the old dairy managers, as far back as the kibbutz goes, all the way up on the dairy manager's wall, a row of black and white frowns. Motke—he was a tyrant, hated women; Hagai—an old pole, died in the frost one year. They all died still running it. That's why their pictures are on the wall. Schliemann—he was a butcher before he immigrated. “I worked with cows before,” he used to say. “What can the difference be, milking, killing?” Aneurysm, when a Holstein off the boat kicked him in the head. All died. Some of them just got tired. Joel says, “It's easy to live in the kibbutz for most people because here and there one or two take all the pressure of the tchulent pot.” The cowshed is a pot that keeps the kibbutz hot. All the milk in the world runs out of that shed door. I don't want Joel's face up on the wall with those men. I want to hear him play. So I say, “Sit at home, relax, play with the girls.”

“Ma,” he says, “I hear the cows thinking when I'm in the bath.”

“What are they thinking about?” I ask.

“Me,” he laughs, “They say, Where the hell is he? This guy holding my belly has got such nervous hands.”

And he goes down the slippery path.

I don't think Joel knows what it is to leave a city. The trees over your head when you learned to walk. The house where you went for your first kiss on a sofa with lace covers. Not that we have lace covers here but he must remember the plastic. He must remember the light on the spring on the night when he took his wife down there, before she was his wife. He doesn't know cities that you can leave, only the night with all those stars out here beyond the lamp lights. I asked him the other day, “What would you have, if you could have anything?”

He said, “Ma, I have this life. What else is there?”

I LEFT A CITY ONCE. I was eight or nine, and when I got out of the camp to sit in the hospital by Magda, I was fifteen. She was a little bitch even then, stealing the cookies from the trolley when the nurse wasn't looking. But she was my friend. I only have my children now, and most of them are stupid. Joel was such a spar-

klung child. And he will die on that cowshed wall, or if he doesn't die, they'll only let him out, like me, when it's too late to run anywhere. So I walk and I talk to Joel, when I can, going down the slippery path. So there's two of us there, sometimes, in the night, listening to the sound of a boy playing a flute that he forgot, playing a flute that he cannot hold anymore, because his hands are cold.

And I tell him, "Once I used to play the flute."

"I remember Ma, I remember."

And then we listen to the cows and hope that they will live forever.