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If God Asks

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The God Asks

Miriam shakes her head when she picks up Israel from school. She doesn't say anything. Just shakes her head real slow like the first time David called and said he wouldn't be coming home for the night. They drive down the wide suburban streets. Fall has left most of the trees spindly and naked, but a few cling to their leaves as if it is a fight they can win. A cloudless day, but the sky still looks more grey than blue.

At home Miriam puts Israel in the back yard and locks the door behind him. He walks outside. Superdog licks his cheek and tries to knock him down by driving his head into the boy's sternum. But Superdog bores easily and soon enough he is in the corner digging furiously.

Israel paces the yard. Brown and yellow leaves cover the ground, rotting. The air is thick and mildewy, not assaulting enough for Israel to plug his nose, but not sweet enough for him to breathe deeply. He turns on the hose and floods the flowerbed. Then he puts his thumb over the end and tries to spray Superdog. It won't reach.

Hearing footsteps, Israel runs to the fence. Maybe it's Eli. He puts his face up against the wood, peering through a crack. Mr. Conway walks by, slowly, carrying his purple leash. Sophie died over a year ago, but he still walks every day, carrying her leash like she has run just out of view. She was seventeen when she died and dragged her back legs most of the time. Superdog tried to play with her once, but she just lay down and Mr. Conway had to pick up her hips before she would move again.

Israel watches the old man walk out of sight and then sits on the step waiting for something to happen. After what seems like forever he hears footsteps. This time they are quick. He runs back to the fence. He is careful not to rub his face against the wood, remembering the time he struggled with Eli for the widest crack in the fence to watch a tow truck haul away the car that had run into the oldest tree on the block. He wound up with a splinter in his cheek and missed the whole thing. Instead Miriam dug tweezers into his skin for a half an hour. By then the only thing left to see was the scar on the tree, which turned out to be fatal.

Israel doesn't see anyone. He hears the back door swing open. "Izzy, you out here?"

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Israel runs around the corner to see his brother, Eli, standing on the top step, still in his school clothes. His khakis are too long and bunched up around his ankles. A beige yamulka is clipped to his head. His navy blue polo has something written in the upper right hand corner that Israel can't decipher.

"What'd you do?" Eli asks

"I hit Derek Harmon in the head," Israel says, unsure if he should be proud.

"With what?"

"My backpack. A rock. A rock in my backpack."

"Did it bleed a lot?"

"Yeah, he got it all over his shirt and dripped it all the way down the hall," Israel says. "Does Mom look mad?"

"Mom always looks mad when she's cooking."

Eli sails off the top step and wraps Israel in a headlock. He rubs his knuckles back and forth on Israel's scalp. Israel wriggles away. Across the yard Superdog barks once and whines. The boys turn to see a squirrel limp in his mouth. He lays it down gently and stares at it until it tries to run and then he scoops it into his jaws, carries it around and puts it down again. The squirrel limps away and Superdog pounces.

Eli runs over and grabs the dog around the neck while the squirrel lies in the leaves. Its leg the only thing moving, pedaling some imaginary bicycle.

"Get the shovel," Eli yells.

"Why?"

"We have to put it out of its misery." Superdog yelps and struggles against the boy's grip.

Israel runs around the side of the house and returns with the shovel.

"Now hit it really hard," Eli says.

Israel looks at the creature. Its legs are in the air, its mouth open, and he can see its two long front teeth. The squirrel is screaming, a scream that Israel can feel like a needle on the soft part of his head.

"Kill it."

Israel raises the shovel and brings it down with a thud.

"Once more, to make sure."

He does it again, closing his eyes as the spade comes down. Superdog whines.

"Go put it in the trash."

Israel picks it up and carries it to the big blue trashcan. The squirrel looks the same dead as it did alive, except blood has seeped out in a thin line around its nose and down toward its mouth.

Round black eyes bulge out of its head.

"I'm sorry," Israel whispers, then shivers as he drops the carcass in with yesterday's scraps.

Onion soup. Green beans. And toast. Israel breathes through his mouth. He pushes the bowl to his left. "Dad, guess what. I killed a squirrel today."

It's the first night David's been home for dinner in four days. Miriam barely looks at him.

"I had to put it out of its mystery," Israel says.

David smiles a weak and apologetic smile at his youngest son.

The phone rings. Everyone quiets, waiting for the caller ID to recite the name. Miriam got the device so phone calls wouldn't ruin dinner. This way they know if it is worth getting up.

"Hart-son, Sal-ly."

Miriam lets out an angry sigh. "You need to tell your mom to stop calling during dinner."

David closes his eyes like he is trying to remember something.

"Hart-son, Sal-ly."

"Just because you don't talk to your mom doesn't mean she can call while we're trying to eat."

The ringing stops.

"Maybe you should give her your work number," Miriam says.

David stares at her and lets his lips fall open like maybe he will say something, but nothing comes.

"We learned about Abraham and Isaac at school today," Eli says.

David turns towards his son.

Israel stares at the brown cloudy liquid in his bowl and looks like he might cry.

"Did you know God asked Abraham to kill his son? He asked him to kill Isaac, just to see if he would."

Israel looks up from his food.

"And Abraham was going to. He took Isaac up to this mountain, put him on a rock and just as he was about to swing God told him he didn't have to."

"He was going to kill him with a shovel?" Israel asks.

"No. He had this big knife, like the ones they sacrificed lambs with."

Israel's eyes get big.

The phone rings, but Eli just talks louder.

"God stopped him at the last second. Right before he cut his head off."

"Hart-son, Sal-ly." Miriam clenches her jaw and glares at her husband.

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“Just think. What if God had been a second late?”

“Hart-son, Sal-ly.”

“What if Abraham killed Isaac and God was like, oh, you didn’t have to do that?” Eli says.

“What if Abraham had said he wouldn’t do it?” Israel asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe God would have killed him. Maybe God wouldn’t have let him be Jewish,” Eli says.

Everyone is quiet for a moment.

“Is something wrong with the food?” Miriam asks her husband.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Me neither,” Israel adds.

Eli slurps happily from his spoon.

“You should eat a little something anyway,” Miriam says to both of them.

Israel eats the last bite of his toast and stares at the rest of the food. He puts his head on the table. “I can’t.”

“Don’t be childish,” Miriam says.

“I hate onion soup too,” David says and leans his head close in to Israel. “And Green beans.”

“Maybe if you came home for dinner more often we could have something you like.”

David’s head is almost lying on the table.

“And I had to pick your son up from school today because he hit a boy in the head with a rock.”

“I didn’t know it was in there,” Israel says.

Miriam rolls her eyes. David nods to his son.

“Maybe if you were around a little more...”

Eli gets up, like he is an actor that had just been cued to go offstage. Israel follows. Miriam doesn’t take her eyes off David.

“I guess since Dad won’t eat, the kids don’t have to.” Miriam throws her arms in the air.

Israel and Eli sit in their room, silenced by their parent’s muffled voices.

“Is that story true?” Israel asks, once the only sound coming from downstairs is dishes against the metal sink.

“What story?”

“The one about Abraham.”

“It’s in the Torah.”

David comes into the boys’ room to tuck them in.

“Is Mom really mad?” Israel asks.

“I’ve been working too much.”

There is a long, heavy silence. Both the boys stare at their father.

"Maybe I'll be home again tomorrow." They all know it will be at least three days.

David tucks Eli in first, like always. He sits on the edge of the bed and looks at his eleven-year old.

"I'm doing a report on the brontosaurus," Eli says and holds the book he is reading out to his dad.

"Why the brontosaurus?"

"He only eats plants. He was the nicest dinosaur, even though he was so big."

David looks at the pictures of the creature, and back at his son. Then he kisses Eli on the forehead and pulls the blankets up to his chest.

Israel's bed is in the opposite corner of the room. David sits down. "How you doing, Bud?"

"I really didn't know the rock was in there. I thought it was empty. I thought I was hitting him with an empty backpack. I swear."

David smiles and puts his heavy hand on the boy's shoulder. They sit in silence for a moment.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"If God asked you to, would you kill me?"

David's eyelids droop and almost close.

"God would never ask me to kill you." David kisses Israel's forehead and pulls the sheets up to his chest. "Never." He gets up to leave.

"But what if he did?" Israel asks.

David stares into his son's pleading eyes. "Goodnight guys, I love you." He switches off the light and closes the door behind him.

Israel stays awake until he sees headlights send shadows dancing across the ceiling, and hears his dad's car pull away.

Israel isn't allowed to go to school the next day. A one-day suspension, the principal decided.

He eats breakfast with Eli, before he goes to school. Eli lets him try on the yamulka. It looks too big on his head, but he likes the way it feels.

"Mom says I'm going to this school when I turn ten," Israel says, posing in front of the mirror, trying to look Jewish. "Then we can walk to school together."

"You know, you have to learn a whole new alphabet," Eli says.

"I already know the alphabet."

"You have to learn a different one, the Hebrew alphabet." Eli points to the symbols on his shirt. "See, this is Hebrew."

"What does that say?"

"Yashira."

"What does that mean?"

"It's the name of the school."

"Say something else in Hebrew."

"Shalom."

"That's an easy one. I know that."

"But I can read it in Hebrew."

"Can you write it?"

"Yeah." Eli writes it slowly on a napkin.

"I can read it," Israel says, "it says shalom."

"That's cheating." Eli takes the yamulka from Israel's head and clips it in his hair. He punches Israel in the arm. "Bye, Izzy." He grabs his backpack and rushes out the door.

Israel takes the napkin to his room and practices writing the word. Now he knows how to read and write Hebrew. "Shalom," he says aloud.

He flips through the dinosaur book he stole from Eli's backpack. He likes the stegosaurus the most.

Miriam spends almost all day in bed, looking for a job. She's been at it for three and half months now. Israel passes her room on the way downstairs. The TV is on too loud. He peers through the doorway. The newspaper, still in its blue plastic bag, lies on the floor next to the bed. Israel stands on his toes and sees Miriam's stringy hair poking out of the top of the blanket. He kicks the doorframe, but his mother doesn't move.

Israel bores by noon, ready for Eli to come home. He goes to the backyard. He throws the ball for Superdog, but the dog won't fetch. Remembering yesterday, he goes around the corner of the house to the big blue trashcan. He wonders if the squirrel is still in there, if he really killed it, if it is really dead. He flips the lid and there it is, legs sticking in the air, mouth open, blood dried around its triangle nose. He picks it up by a front paw and flings it into the yard. Superdog runs over, licks it a few times and tries to nudge it back to life.

"It's dead." Israel says to the dog. "I killed it." He doesn't want to look at it anymore so he grabs it by that same front leg and flings it over the fence, into the neighbor's yard. Then he runs inside and slams the door.

Eli gets home at four, but he has a lot of homework because he left his dinosaur book at home. Israel sits with him at the kitchen table trying to convince his brother that the stegosaurus is better than the brontosaurus.

"Look at its cool spikes."

"They're not that cool."

"And the stegosaurus has two brains; the brontosaurus only has a one tiny one."

"How do you know that?"

"I read it in your book."

Eli slugs Israel in the bicep. "Don't steal stuff out of my backpack."

Miriam gets up at seven and makes the boys spaghetti with marinara. She sets two plates in front of them and goes back upstairs without saying anything.

"Does dad still live here?" Israel asks his brother.

"I don't know."

Israel practices writing Shalom a few more times before bed.

When Israel walks home from the bus stop, he finds his dad's car in the driveway. Inside, Eli is at the kitchen table, reading.

"Where's Dad?"

"He's upstairs," Eli says without looking up. "He doesn't live here anymore."

"What?"

"He's packing. He's moving out for real."

Israel walks to the bottom of the stairs. "I'm going up," he whispers to his brother. Eli flips a page of the dinosaur book.

Israel climbs up the carpet staircase slowly. He tries to steady his breathing. Once he gets to the top step he crouches down and peers around the corner. He looks into his parents' bedroom. Miriam is in bed weeping softly. David packs.

"I'm sorry," David says to the heap of woman in bed. He sighs heavily. "A thousand should get you through the rest of the month." Israel watches his father count out the money and set it on the dresser.

"Let me get settled and then we'll figure stuff out with the boys." David leans down to zip up the suitcase, full of all the clothes he never wears. It is all that was left in the closet.

Israel crawls down the stairs. He pulls a chair up next to Eli.

"You're right; he's packing."

"I know," Eli says.

"Do you think he's sad?"

"I don't know." Eli flips the page.

"Mom's sad," Israel says. "She's crying."

"Mom cries all the time."

They look at the pictures of the pterodactyl. David appears at the bottom of the stairs, suitcase gripped in his left hand.

"So you're moving out for real?" Eli says.

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Voltaire I.T.

“I was thinking we could order pizza and watch a movie before I go.”

“Where are you going?” Israel asks.

“I’m going to live in an apartment close to my office.” David stares into the eyes of his youngest son. He swallows hard.

“Why?” Israel asks. He won’t take his gaze off his father.

“We’ll still see each other all the time,” David looks from Israel to Eli and back. Israel waits for an answer. His mouth is partway open, and his head tilts back to look David in the face.

David begins to say something but is cut off in the first breath.

“What kind of pizza are we going to get?” Eli asks. “Israel gets anchovies,” Eli says as he pokes the air around Israel’s midsection. “And then we have to watch *Beauty and the Beast*.”

Israel clutches his chest. “Noooooo,” he yells like it would be worse than death. “Not *Beauty and the Beast*.”

David smiles at Eli. He sets down the suitcase.

They order a large cheese pizza and rent *Jurassic Park* from the Blockbuster on University. Every time a new dinosaur comes on screen the boys find it in the book and recite facts about it.

“That’s a triceratops,” Eli yells. “It charged its enemies with its horns.”

“And it only eats plant,” Israel adds.

Eli put his head down and rams it into the side of Israel’s arm. “Like that.”

“Ow,” Israel yells. His pizza falls cheese-side down onto the carpet.

“Just think how bad it would have hurt if I had three huge horns.”

David picks up the pizza and rubs his shoe back and forth on the dirty carpet. He throws the piece away and puts the book on the counter.

By the end of the movie all three agree that raptors are the coolest dinosaur. And for a while everything feels almost normal. But the suitcase is still at the bottom of the stairs and they pass it on the way to go to bed.

When the boys are tucked in, David sits down next to Eli. Eli hands the dinosaur book to his dad, open to the page on raptors.

“I think I’m going to do my project on them.”

“What about the brontosaurus?”

“Maybe he’s too nice.”

David flinches. He kisses Eli on the forehead, and gets up.

“That was a really cool movie,” Israel says as David sits on the edge of the bed.

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“Yeah it was.” David looks into his son’s big brown eyes. “I love you, kiddo.” He stands up to leave.

“Dad?” Israel asks.

“Yeah?”

“If God asked you to stay, would you?”

David hangs his head. “Good night, guys. I love you.” He switches off the light and closes the door behind him.

Israel stares at the ceiling. He shivers, but isn’t cold. He hopes David will walk back in, unpack. He hopes the car doesn’t start. Slowly, he gets out of bed and walks to the window. Leaning his forehead against the cold glass, he stares down at the driveway. He sees exhaust forming in the air. The Maxima pulls away. Israel watches it coast down the street, past the trees from which the strongest leaves have dropped to rot with the rest. And he wonders why God would ever ask a dad to kill his son. And he wonders if God will ask anything ever again.

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