

hole in the wall

On Bernadotte Avenue, right next to the Central Bus Station, there's a hole in the wall. There used to be an ATM there once, but it broke or something, or else nobody ever used it, so the people from the bank came in a pickup and took it and never brought it back..

Somebody once told Udi that if you scream a wish into this hole it comes true, but Udi didn't really buy that. The truth is that once, on his way home from the movies, he screamed into the hole in the wall that he wanted Dafne Rimalt to fall in love with him, and nothing happened. And once, when he was feeling really lonely, he screamed into the hole in the wall that he wanted to have an angel for a friend, and an angel really did show up right after that, but he was never much of a friend, and he'd always disappear just when Udi really needed him. This angel was skinny and all stooped and he wore a trench coat the whole time to hide his wings. People in the street were sure he was a hunchback. Sometimes, when there were just the two of them, he'd take the coat off. Once he even let Udi touch the feathers on his wings. But when there was anyone else in the room, he always kept it on. Klein's kids asked him once what he had under his coat, and he said it was a backpack full of books that didn't belong to him and that he didn't want them to get wet. Actually, he lied all the time. He told Udi such stories you could die: about places in heaven, about people who when they go to bed at night leave the keys in the ignition, about cats who aren't afraid of anything and don't even know the meaning of "scat." The stories he made up were something else, and to top it all, he'd cross-his-heart-and-hope-to-die.

Udi was nuts about him and always tried hard to believe him. Even lent him some money a couple of times when he was hard up. As for the angel, he didn't do a thing to help Udi. He just

talked and talked and talked, rambling off his harebrained stories. In the six years he knew him, Udi never saw him so much as rinse a glass.

When Udi was in basic training and really needed someone to talk to, the angel suddenly disappeared on him for two solid months. Then he came back with an unshaven, don't-ask-what-happened face. So Udi didn't ask, and on Saturday they sat around on the roof in their underpants just taking in the sun and feeling low. Udi looked at the other rooftops with the cable hookups and the solar heaters and the sky. It occurred to him suddenly that in all their years together he'd never once seen the angel fly.

"How about flying around a little," he said to the angel. "It would make you feel better."

And the angel said: "Forget it. What if someone sees me?"

"Be a sport," Udi nagged. "Just a little. For my sake." But the angel just made this disgusting noise from the inside of his mouth and shot a gob of spit and white phlegm at the tar-covered roof.

"Never mind," Udi sulked. "I bet you don't know how to fly, anyway."

"Sure I do," the angel shot back. "I just don't want people to see me, that's all."

On the roof across the way they saw some kids throwing a water bomb. "You know," Udi smiled. "Once, when I was little, before I met you, I used to come up here a lot and throw water bombs on people in the street below. I'd aim them into the space between that awning and the other one," he explained, bending over the railing and pointing down at the narrow gap between the awning over the grocery store and the one over the shoe store. "People would look up, and all they'd see was the awning. They wouldn't know where it was coming from."

The angel got up too and looked down into the street. He opened his mouth to say something. Suddenly, Udi gave him a little shove from behind, and the angel lost his balance. Udi was just fooling around. He didn't really mean to hurt the angel, just to make him fly a little, for laughs. But the angel dropped the whole five floors, like a sack of potatoes. Stunned, Udi

watched him lying there on the sidewalk below. His whole body was completely still, except the wings, which were still fluttering a little, like when someone dies. That's when he finally understood that of all the things the angel had told him, nothing was true. That he wasn't even an angel, just a liar with wings.

Translated by Miriam Shlesinger

a souvenir of hell

There's this village in Uzbekistan that was built right smack at the mouth of Hell. The soil there isn't any good for farming, and the minerals aren't too great either, so whatever small income the inhabitants can earn to make ends meet comes mostly from tourism. And when I say tourism I'm not talking about rich Americans in Hawaiian shirts, or grinning Japanese who take pictures of everything that moves. because what would anyone like that be looking for in a godforsaken place in Uzbekistan. The tourism I'm talking about is domestic. As domestic as you can get.

The people coming out of Hell are very different from one another, and it's kind of hard to give an exact profile. Fat/thin, with/without a moustachea very mixed crowd. If they have anything in common at all, it's the way they act. They're all kind of quiet and polite, always giving you the exact change and everything. They never try to haggle over prices, and they always know just what they want-no hemming and hawing. They come in, ask how much, gift wrap/no gift wrap, and that's that. They're all kind of very short-term guests, spending the day and then going back to Hell. And you never see the same one twice, cause they only come out every one hundred years. That's just how it is. Those are the rules. Like in the army when you only get one weekend off out of three, or on guard duty, when

you're only allowed to sit down for five minutes every hour on the hour. It's the same with the people in Hell: one day off every hundred years. If there ever was an explanation, nobody remembers it anymore. By now it's more a matter of maintaining the status quo.

Anna had worked in her grandfather's grocery store for as long as she could remember. Apart from the villagers, there weren't that many customers, but once every few hours someone would come in smelling of sulfur and ask for a pack of cigarettes, or chocolate, or whatever. Some of them asked for things that they'd probably never actually seen and had only heard about from some other sinner. So every once in a while she'd see them struggle to open a can of Coke or try to eat cheese with the plastic wrapper still on it. Things like that. Sometimes she'd try to chat them up, to make friends, but they never knew Uzbek or whatever you call the language she spoke. And in the end, it would always wind up that she'd just point to herself and say "Anna" and they'd point to themselves and mumble "Claus" or "Su Ying" or "Steve" or "Avi," and then they'd pay and take off. So she'd see them again later that evening, cruising the neighborhood or hanging out on some street corner, staring out into the evening sky, and the next day she wouldn't see them anymore. Her grandfather, who suffered from a condition that wouldn't let him sleep more than an hour a night, would tell her how he'd see them at dawn going back down through the opening that was right next to their front porch. It was from this same porch that he also saw her father, who was a pretty nasty piece of work, going down through the opening like the others, stone drunk, and singing some really off-color song. Ninety-odd years later he too was supposed to come back for a day.

Funny, but you could say these people were the most interesting thing in Anna's life. Their faces, the ridiculous clothes, the attempts to guess what terrible thing they were supposed to have done to deserve Hell. Cause the truth is that it really was the only thing going on. Sometimes, when she got bored in the shop, she'd try to

picture the next sinner who'd walk through the door. She'd always try to imagine them very good-looking or funny. And once every few weeks there really might be some gorgeous hunk or else some guy who'd insist on eating the contents of a can without opening it first, and then she and her grandfather would talk about it for days.

Once, this guy walked in who was so gorgeous that she knew she simply had to be with him. He bought some white wine, some soda water, and all sorts of hot spices, and instead of adding up his bill, she just took him by the hand and pulled him toward the house. And the guy, without understanding a word she was saying, followed her and tried his very best, but when they both realized that he just couldn't, Anna hugged him and gave him her biggest smile, to make sure he understood it didn't really matter. But that didn't help, and he cried right through the night. From the moment he left, she prayed every night for him to come back and for everything to be alright. She was praying more for him than for herself, and when she told her grandfather about it, he smiled and said she had a good heart.

Two months later he was back. He came into the shop and bought a pastrami sandwich, and when she smiled at him he smiled back. Her grandfather said it couldn't be him, because everyone knows they only come out once every hundred years, and that it must be his twin or something, and she wasn't really completely sure, either. In any case, when they got into bed, things actually went fine. He seemed content, and so did she. And suddenly she understood that maybe it wasn't only him that she was praying for after all. Later, he went into the kitchen and found the bag he'd left behind the last time, with the soda water and the spices and the wine, and he took it and mixed a drink for Anna and himself that was fizzy and hot and cold, and wine, too. A kind of spritzer from Hell.

When the night was over and he was getting dressed to go, she asked him not to, and he shrugged like someone who had no choice. And after he left, she prayed he'd come a third

time, if it was really him, and if not, that someone would come who looked enough like him that she'd be able to make the same mistake. And a few weeks later, when she started throwing up, she prayed it would be a baby, but it turned out just to be a virus. It was just about then that people in the village began talking about plans to close up the opening from the inside. This had Anna very worried, but her grandfather said it was just a rumor being spread by people who had nothing better to do. "You've got nothing to worry about," he said and smiled at her. "That opening has been there for so long that neither devil nor angel would ever have the nerve to close it." And she believed him, except one particular night, she remembers, when she suddenly felt, for no special reason, and it wasn't even in her sleep, that the opening wasn't there anymore. She ran out in her nightgown and was happy to see that it still was. And then, she remembers, there was a moment when she had this urge to go down there. She felt as though she was being sucked in, because of how she felt about her special visitor, or maybe because she really wanted to see her father, who was a nasty piece of work, or maybe more than anything, it was because she didn't want to go on being alone in this boring village. She put her ear to the cold air coming out of the opening. In the distance she could make out something that sounded like people screaming, or water running-it was impossible to tell just what it was. It was coming from really far away. Eventually she went back to bed, and a few days later the opening really did disappear. Hell continued to exist down below, but nobody came out anymore.

Ever since the opening disappeared, it became harder to make ends meet, and also much more tired and serene. Her grandfather died, she married the fishmonger's son, and the two shops merged. They had several children, and she loved to tell them stories, especially ones about the people who used to walk into the shop, smelling of sulfur. Those stories would scare them, and they'd start to cry. But still, even though she couldn't understand why, she went right on telling them.

Translated by Miriam Shlesinger

rabin's dead

Rabin's dead. It happened last night. He got run over by a scooter with a sidecar. Rabin died on the spot. The guy on the scooter got hurt real bad and passed out, and they took him away in an ambulance. They didn't even touch Rabin. He was so dead, there was nothing they could do. So me and Tiran picked him up and buried him in my backyard. I cried after that, and Tiran lit up and told me to stop crying cause I was getting on his nerves. But I didn't stop, and pretty soon he started crying too. Because I really loved Rabin a lot, but Tiran loved him even more. Then we went to Tiran's house, and there was a cop on the front stairs waiting to bag him, because the guy on the scooter came to and squealed the bus driver who wanted to be god to the doctors at the hospital. He told them Tiran had bashed his helmet in with a crowbar. The cop asked Tiran why he was crying and Tiran said, "Who's crying, you fascist motherfucking pig." The cop smacked him once, and Tiran's father came out and wanted to take down the cop's name and stuff, but the cop wouldn't tell him, and in less than five minutes, there must've been like thirty neighbors standing there. The cop told them to take it easy, and they told him to take it easy himself. There was a lot of shoving, and it looked like someone was going to get clobbered again. Finally the cop left, and Tiran's dad sat us both down in their living room and gave us some Sprite. He told Tiran to tell him what happened and to make it quick, before the cop returned with backup. So Tiran told him he'd

hit someone with a crowbar but that it was someone who had it coming, and that the guy'd squealed to the police. Tiran's dad asked what exactly he had it coming for, and I could see right away that he was pissed off: So I told him it was the guy on the scooter that started it, cause first he ran Rabin over with his sidecar, then he called us names and then he went and slapped me too. Tiran's dad asked him if it was true, and Tiran didn't answer but he nodded. I could tell that he was dying for a cigarette but he was afraid to smoke next to his dad.

We found Rabin in the square. Soon as we got off the bus we spotted him. He was just a kitten then, and he was so cold he was trembling. Me and Tiran and this uptown girl with a navel stud that we met there, we went to get him some milk. But at Espresso Bar they wouldn't give us any. And at Burger Ranch, they didn't have milk, cause they're a meat place and they're kosher, so they don't sell dairy stuff. Finally, at the grocery store on Frishman Street they gave us a half-pint and an empty yogurt cup, and we poured him some milk, and he lapped it up in one go. And Avishag-that was the name of the girl with the stud-said we ought to call him Shalom, because shalom means peace and we'd found him right in the square where Rabin died for peace. Tiran nodded and asked her for her phone number, and she told him he was really cute but that she had a boyfriend in the army. After she left, Tiran patted the kitten and said that we'd never in a million years call him Shalom, because Shalom is a sissy name. He said we'd call him Rabin, and that the broad and her boyfriend in the army could go fuck themselves for all he cared, cause maybe she had a pretty face but her body was really weird.

Tiran's dad told Tiran it was lucky he was still a minor, but even that might not do him much good this time, because bashing people with a crowbar isn't like stealing chewing gum from a candy store. Tiran still didn't say anything, and I could tell he was about to start crying again. So I told Tiran's dad that it was all my fault, because when Rabin was run over I was the one who yelled it to Tiran. And the guy on the scooter, who

was kind of nice at first and even seemed sorry about what he'd done, asked me what I was screaming for. And it was only when I told him that the cat's name was Rabin that he lost his cool and slapped me. And Tiran told his dad: "First, the shit doesn't stop at the stop sign, then he runs over our cat, and after all that he goes and slaps Sinai. What did you expect me to do? Let him get away with it?" And Tiran's dad didn't answer. He lit a cigarette and without making a big deal about it lit one for Tiran too. And Tiran said the best thing I could do would be to beat it, before the cops came back, so that at least one of us would stay out of it. I told him to lay off, but his dad insisted.

Before I went upstairs, I stopped for a minute at Rabin's grave and thought about what would have happened if we hadn't found him. About what his life would have been like then. Maybe he'd have frozen to death, but probably someone else would have found him and taken him home, and then he wouldn't have been run over. Everything in life is just luck. Even the original Rabin-after everyone sang the Hymn to Peace at the big rally in the square, if instead of going down those stairs he'd hung around a little longer, he'd still be alive. And they would have shot Peres instead. At least that's what they said on TV Or else, if the broad in the square wouldn't have had that boyfriend in the army and she'd given Tiran her phone number and we'd called Rabin Shalom, then he would have been run over anyway, but at least nobody would have got clobbered.

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