Safe Room

Debora

Teatro por la Paz Collection, No. 1

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On January 17, 1991, a U.S.-led coalition attacked Iraq. In Israel, the population prepared for possible missile strikes amid growing fears that some might carry chemical weapons. For weeks, civil defense directives shaped everyday life.

A storage room in a residence in Jerusalem.
The walls are covered with plastic sheeting and duct tape. Two chairs. A mat on the floor. Two children's backpacks. A small protective infant shelter, like an incubator. Inside the room: bags, a portable radio, a flashlight, a bucket, gas masks, and objects in disarray. Eva is organizing the space. A curtain separates off the sleeping children. A small night-light glows.
Dim light. A sense of confinement.
Sound: The children's breathing and the half-asleep baby's murmurs can be heard. The portable radio hums continuously with white noise. Eva continues arranging the space. The radio broadcasts patriotic songs. Eva switches it off.

SARAH

(Entering, she puts down her backpack. She is very distressed.) That's the last of the bags. I brought everything we'll need. Thank you, Mom. When you asked us to come to Jerusalem, I felt relieved. I couldn't stay in Tel Aviv with the children. We'll be safer here. Still, by the time we arrived, my legs were shaking. (*She massages her legs as she speaks.)* I can still feel my muscles trembling. I didn't think I'd make it across the city. Haim has spent weeks going from military bases to meetings. I hardly see him. I don't hear his voice telling me everything will be all right. I'm carrying all of this alone. The drive was madness. Cars bumper to bumper, children crying, gas stations packed, the air thick with gasoline. All of Tel Aviv in a panic. No one looking at anyone else. Everyone fleeing, as if in an exodus.

EVA

I can imagine. *(She touches her chest and pauses. Then, with a touch of irony.)* What wouldn't we give for a Moses now, eh?

SARAH

(She looks at her warily, sensing the subtext but choosing not to confront it. She changes the subject.) Thank goodness the children are asleep. *(She picks up the tape.)* I was afraid I wouldn't be able to calm them down—or myself. *(The tape tangles in her hands.)* Damn tape.

Sarah finds a towel, wets it, wrings it out, and presses it into the gap beneath the door.

EVA

I'm glad you came. This is no time to be alone with the children.

SARAH

Can I help you finish sealing the room? There are corners that were left unsealed.

EVA

I helped Miriam stock up on water and canned food. *(Pause.)* Miriam… the one who hid with us in the attic.

Eva looks around the room, as though that other space were returning. She touches the plastic as if she could feel the past.

SARAH

Yes mom, I remember Miriam. I'd rather focus on what's happening now. That's already more than I can handle. I have the instructions… I want to follow them step by step so I don't make any mistakes. We have to seal the doors and windows with plastic and tape. We have to try on the masks and make sure they fit properly… They say we mustn't panic. *(Pause.)* They say everything is under control.

EVA

Thank you. I've already tried mine on and adjusted it. Everything under control… What nonsense.

Sarah reaches into her backpack and takes out the mezuzah. The sight of it awakens a memory, and her face lights up with almost childlike delight.

SARAH

Mom, I noticed there's no mezuzah on the door. *(She holds it out to Eva with pride, as if offering her a gift.)* I bought it for you. Look… it's a dove. To protect us.

Eva does not take it. Her expression changes. She is serious and wounded, but not cold.

EVA

Thank you, but I'm not putting it up. Mark the doors so God spares the Israelite children… but kills the Egyptian ones? *(Pause.)* What were the Egyptian children guilty of?

SARAH

(She lowers her arm slightly, hurt and angry.) I thought you'd like the dove.

EVA

Sarah, my love… I appreciate the thought. (*Her gaze softens. She gently strokes Sarah's arm and sighs deeply.)* Poor dove… *(Almost to herself.)* The things they make it stand for. *(She speaks very slowly, her voice dropping.)* Do you know what prayer is inside that dove? *(Pause. Sarah does not answer.)* The Shema… In Auschwitz…

SARAH

(She cuts her off sharply, angry.) Don't talk about death now. *(Firmly.)* I need to stay strong for the children.

EVA

(She looks at Sarah and slowly nods.) You're right. You need to take care of them. I'm sorry I upset you.

Sarah returns to her long list of instructions. Eva sits nearby, watching her in silence, then slowly looks around the room.

SARAH

The bucket… the towel… the water… the flashlight… the radio… (*She touches each object as she names it. She moves with determination, but her exhaustion is beginning to show. Her pace quickens.)* The candles… the matches… the masks… the masks, sorry… the masks. The baby's protective tent…

Sarah finds a syringe. She lifts it carefully and stares at it, frozen for a moment.

EVA

(In a low voice, almost a whisper—gentle but alert.) What is that for, sweetheart?

SARAH

(Tense, she keeps her eyes fixed on the syringe, gripping it too tightly.) It's… atropine. The antidote to the gas.

EVA

(She shakes her head very slowly, more in sorrow than judgment, and lowers her gaze.) An antidote… It's incredible. History repeats itself.

SARAH

(She takes a deep breath to steady herself, then carefully sets the atropine down.) Yes. They hate us. They always have. If we didn't exist… they would invent us.

EVA

(She looks at Sarah, weary, and moves a little closer without intruding.) My darling… I've seen something else, too. *(Pause.)* People carrying deep wounds. People in pain… alone and angry. *(A longer pause.*) And sometimes, when people can't bear to look at themselves… they need someone else to blame.

SARAH

(She pulls away slightly.) Do we have to philosophize now, Mom? I need all my strength to take care of the children. (*She turns away, as if ending the conversation, then steadies herself.)* If we don't stand together, we won't survive. I can't do this alone. This is no time for division.

EVA

Together… There's always a price to pay for standing together.

SARAH

This is no time to talk about the price. *(Pause.)* This is the time to stand firm.

EVA

It’s always the time. And the price isn’t paid by everyone.

A long silence. A piercing alarm sounds. Both women freeze. Eva rises. Sarah remains where she is, paralyzed, her body slow to respond. She looks at the list in her hand, then, as if she no longer knows what to do with it, lets it fall to the floor.

SARAH

(She begins to stammer, her whole body on alert.) The shaking… did you feel it too? Was it a missile or an interceptor? Did it land nearby? *(She turns, not knowing where to go.)* What do we do now? Should I wake the children? Put on their masks? And the baby… should I put the baby in the tent?

EVA

Lower your voice. (*Whispering.)* We don’t want to wake the children. *(She places a hand on Sarah’s shoulder.)*

Blackout. A small night-light continues to shift from one color to another. The strobe flashes.

SARAH

Where’s the atropine? (*She searches frantically among the objects. She finds it, looks at it, then sets it aside.)* What did they say on the radio? What are we supposed to do?

The lights flicker back on. A pause. Sarah slowly crumples to the floor and sits hugging her knees, like a little girl. Eva watches her in silence. Though visibly moved, she remains composed. She approaches slowly, sits beside Sarah, and gently touches her shoulder, waiting for a response.

EVA

Sarah, darling, it was far away. Waking the children will only frighten them.

Sarah hands Eva her mask, then puts on her own.

SARAH

And you… aren't you going to put yours on?

EVA

(Trying to soothe her, she sets the mask aside and embraces Sarah.) We're all right. Listen… the children are still asleep.

SARAH

(She holds the radio to her ear and repeats what she hears in a flat voice, as if trying to reassure herself.) They say missiles have landed in Haifa… Nothing in Jerusalem. They don't know yet whether anyone was hurt or how much damage there is. (*A brief pause. Her tone shifts, as though reciting something she has memorized.)* They say they'll soon tell us when it's safe to leave the sealed room.

EVA

What are you saying? Return to your homes? Go back to Tel Aviv?

SARAH

They say we have to show them that we're standing firm.

EVA

I ignored that fear once… and I paid dearly for it. In the thirties, fear hung heavy in the air, too. But they told us we were exaggerating. *(A long pause. She lowers her voice.)* And we believed them. *(A brief* pause.) We stayed.

SARAH

(Her body stiffens, and she looks away.) Don't compare the two, Mom.

EVA

Different, yes. (*Pause.)* But the knot… the knot is the same. *(She touches her chest.)* Following the others… (*Pause.)* And afterward… *(A long pause.)* Only your aunt and I were left. *(She touches her chest again.)* Since then… this feeling has never left me.

SARAH

Trusting them is the only thing keeping me on my feet right now. Someone has to know what to do. They know. *(Pause, anguished.)* If we can't trust them… who can we trust? (*A brief pause.)* Just the thought of disobeying turns my stomach. *(She touches her stomach.)* It makes me sick. It would feel like betrayal. *(Pause.)* I'd be completely alone. *(She takes a deep breath.)* Haim wouldn't understand. To

him… it would be treason. *(Faster.)* My family, my friends… they'd look at me as if I were a traitor. *(Angrily.)* I love my people.

EVA

(She listens.) Yes. That love. *(Long pause.)* That is how we learned it. *(Longer pause.)* The image of Abraham raising the knife... *(Pause.)* And no one says anything... And there was Isaac, his eyes filled with terror. *(Long silence.)* I was ten years old. *(Remembering.)* The classroom. The open book. But that was not the worst of it. *(Pause. It is difficult for her to say.)* Abraham, the father, does not even tremble. *(Her voice fades.)* And I... *(Long pause.)* I could not stop looking at him

SARAH

(Not fully hearing her, she adjusts the tape around the door.) Mom, this is no time for doubts. We have enemies. *(Pause.)* We have to protect ourselves. *(Pause.)* To disobey… would be to betray those who sacrificed their lives for this country. *(She stops.)*

EVA

(She looks at her without correcting her.) Yes… *(A compassionate pause.)*

SARAH

I can see their faces. *(Pause.)* Haim… my uncles and cousins… my friends. (*Her voice tightens.)* The ridicule. The contempt. They'd say I'm incapable… hysterical… ungrateful. That I'm nobody. That I have no authority to speak. It makes me sick. *(A long pause. She slowly*

raises her head, unsettled by the thought.) But what if everyone started questioning?

EVA

(She holds Sarah's gaze, giving her time to follow the thought.) And if they did?

SARAH

(Her certainty returns all at once.) Everything would fall apart. *(She stands.)* It would be pure selfishness. *(A tense silence. She means every word.)*

EVA

(Thinking of her grandchildren, she speaks simply.) Or perhaps… the beginning of something different. The country matters *(Pause.)* But your children matter more.

SARAH

(She looks away, clutching the list.) Do you know what people say about you?

EVA

(*Calmly, she places a hand on her chest.)* No. (*Pause.)* What matters is whether I can be with myself and be at peace *(A long pause.)* Whether I can question and still love. *(A sustained silence.)* Seeing has a price. Judgment hurts. The body feels it. It pierces me here. But burying doubts doesn't make them disappear. It only makes thinking impossible. *(A brief silence.)* Sirens, missiles, lists… *(She looks*

around.) Here, in this "safe" room… tell me, darling—do you truly feel safe?

SARAH

(She avoids the question, her gaze shifting away. Almost automatically.) They say we should go back to normal.

EVA

(A weary smile.) Normal… as if any of this were normal. (A longer pause.) Sometimes… we are afraid. .And we question anyway.. (She looks into the distance.) The nation. The tribe. *(Pause.)* Words. We hear the same stories again and again until they become the only truth we can imagine. *(A long pause.)* Questioning hurts. *(A longer pause.)* And sometimes the price is high. *(She looks at Sarah without pressing her.)* When we come into this world, we cannot survive without arms that hold us. First comes belonging. Then a name, a place. And before we know it… we obey. (*She looks at Sarah, deeply moved.)* Your children are not an idea. They have bodies. They breathe. They want to live. The nation cannot be their mother. (*She meets Sarah's gaze.)* You are.

Sarah curls inward. Her shoulders drop. The adult in her begins to fade. The children can be heard.

EVA

Listen to your body, Sarah.

A child's voice is heard.

CHILD

Mommy…

Sarah straightens abruptly, her body responding before thought. She takes two steps.

Blackout