The Thistle

by Benjamin Shalva

"We will surrender the seventh year..." - Nehemiah 10:32

A thistle grows beside our door. Its leaves pour past the jamb, serrated, spinach green, barbs the color of bone. Shoshana says it is a Bull Thistle. Bull Thistle, I joke—that was my nickname in college. She tosses me a quick smile and rolls her eyes. Then, with an index finger, she tests the tip of a barb. Her fingertip cups at the point of contact. She holds still, gunslinger steady, as if daring the furious thing. Shoshana, I say. I am surprised by the sound of my voice, by how thick the grief. Shoshana, I say, it is seven years. She holds very still. Then, without looking at me, she lowers her hand. Milk Thistle, she says, correcting herself. She brushes by the plant and goes inside.

Shoshana has soft hips and a crown of dense, black curls. Small, unambitious breasts, and when she laughs, she lobs a lone note—*Huh!*—a huff up from her gut. Take off your shoes, she tells me. Dig your toes through the soil. She is gardening. It is early spring. I watch, admiring her ankles, the plump pads of her feet. I called the clinic, I tell her. I wiggle my toes deeper, enjoying the cool and grainy damp. This does feel good, I say. Shoshana nods. Nature's Prozac, she says. I watch her pound and dig. I can make out the ridge of her spine beneath her thin cotton flannel. I walk my fingers along it. That tickles, she says. I spoke with Gali, I tell her—she said you have to call yourself to cancel. Why? Shoshana asks. I guess they run into issues, I tell her—a husband calls and cancels his wife's appointment without her knowledge. Gali says it happens all the

time—one spouse wants to keep trying, the other wants to call it off. Shoshana sings. *You say tomato and I say tomahto.* She has a sultry voice. She can't hold a tune, but I'm not the one to tell her. *You say potato and I say potahto.* I close my eyes, toes cold. I tip my face to the sun. *Tomato, tomahto, potato, potahto. Let's call the whole thing off.*

My favorite name for a boy is Aaron. My father's oldest brother was an Aaron. He died in a car accident when I was three. I have a photograph of him holding me, the two of us openmouthed, laughing. In Hebrew, the name would be *Aharon,* three syllables, the first two a breakthrough: *Aha!* For a girl, I love the name Eve. Though, one night, Shoshana awoke from a deep sleep and cried: *Ayala!* In the morning, she had no memory of it. I told her what she'd said. I told her I liked the name. *Ayala,* Shoshana repeated, slowly, tasting the name. Then, she swatted a hand in front of her face. It would never work, she said—what if we move back home? No one would know how to say it.

Seven is greater than the sum of its parts. It is mythic, prime, divisible by severing its tail. Then, seven becomes six and six divides nicely—two pairs of three, three pairs of two. The first two years, after our wedding in Virginia, we lived in an absorption center in the Negev, in a town of bleached concrete and honest-to-God tumbleweeds. Our apartment came furnished with a half-size fridge, a hotplate, a table, a desk, two chairs, two cots, and, in the bathroom, a toilet, sink, and standing shower. We never pushed the cots together. On one, we stacked laundry, and on the other, we slept—naked, limbs laced, a pelvis cupped to a rump. Every night, one of us fell out of bed and climbed in again—that was how young. Young enough to come up empty after a year and promise six more. Seven, we promised. Seven years, before we rest.

Don't cut it down, Shoshana says. Shoshana, I argue, it's as big as a tree. She ignores me. It gives shade, for God's sake, I say. Very slowly, she threads her hand between the leaves. I watch, holding my breath as if she's defusing a bomb. I can't see her hand, but her forearm flexes. Then, slowly, she retracts, twirling a leaf between finger and thumb. She lifts the leaf before her nose. I'm going to *crush* you, she says. She snaps her molars. She's been doing this kind of thing for weeks—little flourishes, accents, odd bits and twitches. She hardly sleeps. I'm going to *crush* you, Shoshana says, and turn you into thistle tea. Terrific, I think—more snake oil. Another herbal Hail Mary. And she hasn't called the clinic. Thistle is good for strong emotions, she tells me—it's a cleanse. I imagine her uprooting the thistle and, like a sword swallower, dropping her head back and downing the thing—inch by inch. I see it move through her, scouring, scrubbing, purging the words. *Viability. Hysterosonogram. Micromanipulation. Follicular Phase.* Then, she is cleansed. Sounds like a plan, I say—maybe I'll try some, too. That's the point, Shoshana says—I was making it for you.

We are a nosy nation, a nation of neighbors. Shoshana is in the aisle of the largest supermarket in Jerusalem when an old woman shuffles up—a neighbor—a basket in one hand, a head of garlic in the other. She is ancient, hunchbacked, kerchiefed—direct from the shtetl. Into the *huwomb,* the woman says. She hands Shoshana the garlic. Into the *huwomb,* she says again. Shoshana does not understand. The woman snatches back the garlic and lowers it to to the level of Shoshana's crotch. She twists her wrist, pantomiming, jerking the garlic up, up. Into the *huwomb,* she says, into the *huwomb.* Then, she hands Shoshana the garlic again and pats her cheek. Shoshana is telling me the story as we unpack the bags. It is year four. We live in a neighborhood swelling

with expats, with vacation rentals. We own a battered Toyota. Its radio's been stolen, twice. Where's the garlic? I ask, pretending to look through the bags. I am an ass, I know; but, these days, I have to make a joke of it—our hope. I have to laugh, like the Biblical Sarah. Into the *huwomb.* Into the *huwomb.* That's just the kind of thing you run into here—the ambush, the unwanted advice. The Bubbe discussing your womb in the produce aisle. Like my ancestor, I laugh—I have to punch back. But Shoshana is nothing like Sarah. She is Rebecca—dogged, adaptable, impressed. The garlic? Shoshana says—it didn't look good. I bought a shallot instead.

On Shabbat afternoons, we picnic with friends. It's an explosion of Tupperware—salads, cold chicken, kugel, fresh fruit. It is the fifth year, the sixth. The women wax and wane. They swap maternity clothes. They check their breasts for milk, cupping them like melons and giving a quick lift. Their toddlers squat and tumble on fat little legs. We are not especially devout, but Shoshana, on Shabbat, wraps her hair in a scarf. She might be a mother, I think. From afar, she might be mistaken for the mother of that little girl, the one climbing the tree. Or that boy stabbing the sand with a spoon. And isn't that what they say? That they are all our children. That after the horrors, the camps, the gas, there can be no more orphans. And it is true—you could turn your back on your child in a crowded park and nothing would happen. No one would let it. We will, one day, beat their spoons into swords—but not yet. Walking home, Shoshana and I are quiet. We walk single file. The air, at this hour, is sour. Cats slink around baking garbage bins. Behind us, we hear the rattle-clack of a stroller. We step to the side. A man passes, wearing a black suit, a black hat, a red, wire-brush beard. I glance down. The stroller he pushes—cheap, weightless, round handled—is empty. A thousand explanations, but the one I indulge is six years in the making. A barren wife. A husband refusing to yield. A ritual—on Shabbat afternoons, the

man kisses his wife on the cheek. Then, he wheels his empty stroller through the snaking streets. He wheels it to the park. He wheels it past the slide, the swings. He sings to it—lullabies, songs from his childhood. He wheels it home, waiting for his grief to fall asleep.

We cut it down—together. We wear heavy gardening gloves. I ask Shoshana if the thistle would have kept on growing. Shoshana says yes—but not taller. It would have simply thickened, she says. She is snapping the severed trunk into sections, peeling the stalks, the leaves. What's the plan? I ask. She points to a fallow patch of dirt, a bald spot at the back of the garden. She is going to sprinkle the remains there, she tells me, then cover it with cardboard and plastic. In no time, she says, it will turn to soil. She has called the clinic and canceled her appointments. She has tossed her pills. Will they miss us? I wonder. Will the staff at the clinic remember our names? When we run into them in the market, a year from now, two, will they bother to greet us? Yes, I decide. They will. Of course, they will. We are a people that cannot resist. *Eze chamuda!* they will cry—*Such a cutie!* Then, they will bend low, cooing, pinching a chubby thigh. And our daughter, she will be yawning. Or smiling. Or gumming the strap of the stroller. And she will look nothing like us. And she will crawl through the garden, like her mother, determined. She will grab whatever's within reach—a flower, a sprout, a weed. Which is why we not only cut the thistle, but pulled it up by the roots. To clear the way. For our beautiful girl. Ayala.

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