

Michal Govrin

Between Two and Four

Translated from the Hebrew by Dalia Bilu and Michael P. Kramer

Every day between two and four the little girl was left by herself. The first few moments of those two hours—hours that would soon freeze until the world returned, thawing into its normal course—were still taken up by the usual routine that followed the meal. The mother piled the dishes into the sink to wait for after their nap, and the father filled the kitchen—already steeped in the smells of vegetable soup and pumpkin—with the aroma of a cheap cigar that mingled with steam from the kettle and vapors that rose from the water poured into his tea cup. But these moments of grace came to an end when the newspaper dropped onto the father's eyeglasses, and his snores were answered by the mother's mutterings and mumblings as she too dozed off, and a prolonged, oppressive silence took hold of the house.

The sliding door closed behind her, and her room drowned in boredom. Sitting herself down on the prickly blanket that covered the sofa, she could not decide how to occupy herself. The smell of moth balls wafted from sweaters brought out with the panic of the first rains and nipped at her nostrils. When winter approached, the grey window always seemed terrified by a looming disaster. Now, the smell made the strangeness in the window even stranger. When she blinked her eyes shut, the window frame continued to float beneath her eyelids, a phosphorescent green that quickly turned to gold and was burned there, a sharp stain.

The only refuge was the balcony, whose tiles still held the warmth of the morning sun's rays. She poked her head through the iron railings, above wilting plants in asbestos pots. The new scene stamped on her sight brought with it the cooing of wild doves, air laden with the smell of mown grass, and the top of a birch tree, pigeons hopping from its branches onto telephone wires. The waves of her breathing caressed her, and the room's terror was dispelled from her lungs, replaced by an inexplicable joy that seeped into her throat until she almost cried out. Biting hard on a hunk of sweater she had stuffed in her mouth to stifle the scream, the girl solemnly abandoned herself to the waves of happiness that flooded her chest and swept along with them random pictures drenched in tenderness.

But just as suddenly as she had freed herself from the grip of the room and the sofa, so it was now—as if something inside her decided that she had had enough. At once, she found herself in the midst of a string of hushed actions, intended first of all to open the sliding door to her room and to guide it carefully back into place, and then to open the front door, which, despite the cautious pressure she put on every fraction of the handle's turn, and the spit she spread on the cold bolt of the lock, still made squeaking sounds that made her heart jump and the whole stairwell pound and spin. The last slam, and the smell of plaster and dust that filled the stairwell, gave an air of secret adventure to the freedom now galloping toward her.

It was cool in the yard. Now and then streaks of light broke through the clouds and rushed across her face. They would light up the wall of the house just for a moment and then dissipate, leaving a patch of pale light on the limestone hills. Fallen leaves, earthworms, splintered ice-cream sticks, and cigarette stubs were scattered around the foot of the birch tree. She lay her hand on its naked trunk, but, weak with joy, she could not bring herself to climb it. For that she would have to take off her shoes, and the woolen socks her mother had folded down, and fuss with the folds of the skirt that

flapped uncertainly between her knees. Finally the sun's warmth pulled her legs out from under her, and she sat cross-legged, spreading her skirt over clods of earth. She stared at the vein of a yellowing leaf until it became blurry. But after a moment, eyes that had refused to blink so as not to miss a single detail of the exhilarating sights were stabbed with a sharp pain. Or maybe it was the smell of manure, rising from the sacks of the gardener who was then approaching the tool shed, that swept the girl away from her reveries.

The gardener's heavy boots thudded on the stones that paved a path between the tall blades of grass. He wore coarse blue workclothes, his shirt carelessly tucked into his belt, black rubber baskets filled with gardening tools on his back. His dark face shone with a gentle kind of gaze that only deepened the darkness of his curls and moustache.

Whenever he rode down the garden paths on his rusty bicycle, he would fix his dark smile and black eyes upon her. Slow and quiet. When she lagged downcast behind the bigger children, the gardener, popping up suddenly behind the bushes with his shears, was like a wave of warmth softening the moment's stings. It was clear to her that the warmth was directed at her, the smile at her, and that he passed through the corner of the garden only to look at her. She tried to look pretty. Not to run around. To keep her skirt from blowing up. She was afraid that the other children would notice the gardener's glances. Without anyone saying so, it was clear to her that the looks would then stop. That the warmth would immediately cool. That it was forbidden.

So after what was to happen, on days when she would be woken by the noise of the lawn mower, or when the stunning smell of mounds of mown grass would get tangled between her legs on her way home, she would take the long way, roundabout the building, so as to avoid the tool shed and the glance of the gardener darkening in the doorway.

But now, when the gardener approached, her body was so weak she could not get up and leave, or turn her head, or even lift her lingering gaze from the figure clad in coarse blue, advancing with measured treads between the flowering shrubs. Even when it became clear that this time the gardener was coming straight toward her, she could not turn her eyes away.

When he stopped, her eyes were glued to his belt. The bottom of his shirt rose and fell over it as he breathed.

“How much do you weigh?”

The thick silence in which she was stuck was shattered by the gardener’s voice, a rough voice, like that of a man who has for some time not moved his tongue. She shrank back slightly and tried to hide her body with a hesitant smile.

“How much do you weigh?”

This time the heavy smile returned to the gardener’s eyes, and they shone with a soft, dark warmth. In vain she tried to remember the scale covered with glossy oilcloth in the nurse’s room. The pictures evaporated even before they were formed.

“Do you want me to weigh you?”

Now the gardener’s gaze lay gently on the nape of her neck, as if he were rolling her on the lawn against her will. She drew her legs under the outspread skirt. Clods scratched her knees, and small, hard bits brushed into her socks. When she stood beside the gardener, she still took care to straighten her skirt. And for some reason the grass, the few flowering shrubs trying to grow between the foam of the laundry water and the puddles of sewage, and the tree receding into the distance—all of them seemed to be taking leave of her with great ceremony. But because of her weakness, she could not cough up the lump of unease that stuck in her throat.

She had never before entered the tool shed. Even its outsides were no more than a vague memory of her slipping past its door. Now she suddenly found herself inside it,

surrounded by darkness, and the smell of soil mixed with the stench of mouse droppings made her knees even weaker than before.

“Wait here, I’ll put on the light.”

The iron door slowly creaked closed. In the darkness she heard only the sounds of boards banging and slats snapping; no doubt they blocked the gardener on his way to the fuse box on the opposite wall. The nearly pitch-black shed was filled with broken furniture, cement planters, and tattered books. More light filtered in past the sandbags left on the windows since the last war than came from the painted blue bulb that spewed shadows from its depths. It never occurred to her to ask where the scales were, or why. And even if she had tried to ask, the hard lump in her throat would have stifled the syllables. Still, despite the dark, she felt that she had to be good, the way she always felt when the gardener passed by. She found it hard to rouse her body from its languor, but tried nevertheless to stretch her limbs. Straining to keep her eyes open, she saw nothing but dark shapeless lumps. The stench, the darkness and the snapping sounds swelled about her until she very nearly stumbled. She clenched her fists.

Cracking wood carried the gardener’s steps from the other side of the shed. She smiled her good-girl smile in the dark, so that it would all be over, and he would continue on his way on his bicycle.

“I’ll lift you onto the scale.”

A cold touch under her skirt, and she was lifted from the ground. Her limp legs seemed detached from her body, and her head drooped. The gardener’s grip enclosed her, holding her tightly to himself, just above his knees. A coarse chill sent a shudder through her spine and her curls.

“Soon I’ll know how much you weigh.”

The gardener hummed.

“ . . . how much you weigh.”

He bent himself above her head, again.

Still she smiled the good-girl smile fixed on her lips. In the gardener's strong hands, her body seemed to have already floated away and abandoned her. Only the chill remained.

Somehow, she did not collapse when the gardener put her back on the ground and her legs bore her weight, not his hands. The smell of mouse droppings and putrid rubber slapped her, like a sudden wave. For a moment she stood still in the dark, with the smile still fixed on her face.

“Would you like to know how much you weigh?” She heard these words somewhere behind her when, like a wind-up doll, she suddenly began to run across the planks, the black rubber baskets, the rakes, and burst through the iron door which opened with a whine when she pushed it. In the sudden flood of afternoon light, the shrubs, the puddles of sewage, and the mouseholes were blind to her. She gasped, and the gulp of breath froze transparent and bottomless in her stomach. Her sight returned to her only on the second floor, next to the neighbors' door, which smelled as usual of frying burgers and radishes. With thunder in her heart that shook the whole stairwell, she took out the key hanging on a string around her neck. As she guided the trembling key to the keyhole, everything went dark again. As if all her body had emptied itself and flowed out through her eyes. Suddenly, without remembering exactly how, she found herself within the walls of her room.

The parents arose, and the home awoke, and the kitchen filled with the kettle's steam and the smell of squeezed oranges. Stern doors were abruptly thrown open, and the girl's room was overwhelmed by the clatter of pots slammed back into their places and by the father's cigarette-filled coughs. But on that day the self-confident sounds that

ordinarily melted the void in her stomach were shunted aside by the shivering that would not let her be.

The mother's calls hurried her into the kitchen. For a moment longer she found refuge in the dimness of the hallway, and then she dropped onto her chair in the warmth and steam of the kitchen. She sat opposite a window that opened onto grey skies.

Even after the chocolate and orange juice she stuffed down her throat mixed their sweet and sour into a queasy mash, she went on pulling at her panties underneath the table. She gazed out far beyond the bare arms of the tree in the window, and her gaze was shattered only when the damp cloth wiped away the cake crumbs and drops of juice that trembled on the table top.

The little girl was led unconsciously to the big, flung-open window in the parents' room. Through that window, the room let in a draught of air and let out the smell of mattresses soaked with strangeness and the sourness of cigarettes.

The shouts of children rose up to the window and drifted down without disturbing her gaze, entangled as it was in the arms of the tree and the raindrops of denial.