



VINTAGE

THE BOOK OF INTIMATE GRAMMAR

DAVID GROSSMAN

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About the Book

Eleven years old and on the cusp of puberty, Aron Kleinfeld is precocious, imaginative – the leader of his gang of friends. But his bar mitzvah is looming, his friends are all hitting puberty and Aron, terrified and revolted by what he sees around him, enters a state of arrested development. He stops growing, retreats from the world, and is imprisoned in the body of a child for three long years. While Israel inches towards the Six-Day War, and his friends cross the boundary between childhood and adolescence, Aron remains in his child's body, spying on the changes that adulthood wreaks as, like his hero Houdini, he struggles to escape the trap of growing up.

About the Author

David Grossman was born in Jerusalem. He is the author of numerous works of fiction, non-fiction and children's literature. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and has been translated into twenty-five languages around the world. He is the recipient of many prizes, including the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Artes et des Lettres, the Buxtehuder Bulle in Germany, Rome's Premio per la Pace e l'Azione Umitaria, the Premio Ischia International Award for Journalism, Israel's Emet Prize, and the Albatross Prize given by the Günter Grass Foundation.

Also by David Grossman

Fiction

In Another Life
Someone to Run With
Be My Knife
The Zigzag Kid
See Under: Love
The Smile of the Lamb
To The End of the Land
Lion's Honey: The Myth of Samson

Non-Fiction

Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics
Death as a Way of Life: Israel Ten Years After Oslo
Sleeping on a Wire: Conversations with Palestinians in
Israel
The Yellow Wind

DAVID GROSSMAN

The Book of Intimate
Grammar

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
Betsy Rosenberg

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

ARON IS STANDING on tiptoe for a better view of the street below, where Mama and Papa have just stepped out to breathe some fresh air at the end of a long hot day. They look so small from here. He can taste the dusty metal of the blinds on his lips. His eyes glow. It isn't nice to watch like this. From above. They almost seem like dolls down there, a slow tubby one and a little snippety one. It isn't nice to watch, but it is kind of funny, and kind of scary maybe. The trouble is, Zacky and Gideon see them too. Still, he can't tear himself away. Y'alla, let's go, grumbles Zacky, his nose squashed flat against the blinds. If What's-her-name turns up now we're history. Hey, whispers Aron, here come the Kaminers. Old man Kaminer is going to die, says Gideon. See how yellow he is? You can tell.

Mama and Papa stopped to talk to the Kaminers from Entrance A. They flickered in and out of sight behind the spreading fig tree. Don't ask, sighed Esther Kaminer. Snatches of conversation drifted up to the fourth-floor window. Poor Avigdor—she shook her head—it's a miracle he's still alive, and Mama clucked her tongue: God help anyone who falls into a doctor's clutches. They chop you to pieces for diploma practice. Avigdor Kaminer, slouching as usual, stared blankly at his chattering wife. And you wouldn't believe what it's costing, she moaned, what with the medication and the dietetic food, and a taxi home every time after the dialysis. If you ask me, said Mama as she and Papa continued their stroll, she can hardly wait to be rid of him, he's getting too expensive for her—Aron saw her lips move and guessed what she was saying—and who does La Kaminer hope to hook after he's gone, with her hair falling out by the handful already, as if she didn't have enough of a

dowry; she isn't fooling anyone with that savings-and-loan bouffant, the bald spots show a mile. Papa merely nodded as usual, distracted by a bit of litter on the sidewalk, a scrap of newspaper, a lemon rind. Don't look now, it's Strashnov, said Mama, her lips twisting into a sour smile. You think the snob will say hello? Hello, Mr. Strashnov, how's the family?

It's your father, said Aron flatly. Y'alla, let's go, said Gideon, transfixed at the window: his father, dressed to the nines in Terylene trousers, with a tie on, even in this khamsin. Mr. Strashnov nodded disdainfully and pursed his lips as he minced along. Well, that's a fine hello; thinks he's too good for us, does he? Papa blocked his way. Back from the whatsit ... the university? Mr. Strashnov pursed his lips again. Ha, he has to make faces before he'll talk, before he'll open his mouth and say hello, afraid to let in a little air, is he? And his wife has to take in typing and work her fingers to the bone, because Professor Inallectual can't earn a decent living, hissed Mama, waving goodbye and shuddering in his chilly wake.

Come on, Ari, let's go, said Gideon, backing away from the window. But we haven't seen anything yet, whispered Aron. Why're the two of you so scared all of a sudden? Zacky and Gideon exchanged glances. Look, Ari, said Gideon, staring down at his sandals, actually ... there's something I wanted to tell you before, before we broke in—Not now! fumed Aron, we'll go ahead as planned! And he strutted back to the center of the room, with Zacky and Gideon reluctantly following him till they too fell under the spell of this raided sanctuary, this unsuspected ice cube in a block of steamy flats, and they tiptoed after him over the rug-checkered floors, past the black leviathan of a piano in the salon; Aron pointed to a trio of ivory figures on the bookshelf, then paused to contemplate the statuettes on another shelf, a group of naked men and women holding hands as they danced, a boy with his chin resting on his

hand, a curvaceous torso—and suddenly he remembered his old guitar with the crack down the middle and the strings all torn; he had taught himself to pick out tunes, his sister Yochi loved to hear him play, but Mama and Papa said he couldn't have a new one, his bar mitzvah was only a year and a half away and they had other plans for him. Aron paced resentfully and stopped in front of the painting with a castle carved out of a cliff that looked as if it might crash into the sea any moment. Her and her pictures, he muttered, hands on his hips, you've got to be meshuggeneh to paint like that. And Gideon said, Right, that's what my father calls "modern art." Aron could just imagine him saying those words. It's phony, it's ridiculous, I feel like taking a hammer and smashing it to bits, he ranted, kicking the wall for emphasis. And then he stopped: the piano seemed to rumble a warning.

Come on, squealed Zacky, haven't we seen enough already? No, and we don't have proof yet either, replied Aron, turning away. That was really dumb, what you said about her not having a shadow, said Zacky. Well, she doesn't, snapped Aron, surveying the book-lined shelves. Why else does she carry a parasol all summer, and what about the time we followed her, why did she slink behind the buildings and the trees? To fool us, that's why; Zacky snarled and shifted his weight, pressing his legs together in distress. His lumpish potato face glowered at Aron. Then he peeked through the blinds and recoiled.

Aron noticed and peeked out with him. Below, under the fig tree, was a heavysset man glancing anxiously over his shoulder. Gideon too peeked out. The man approached a small green Fiat and started fumbling in his pockets for the keys. Aron had never seen this man before, but with a pounding heart he knew who it was. Once he'd overheard a grownup say that Zacky's mother, Malka Smitanka, had someone on the side. He had started following her around, watching her whenever she went out, but he'd never

caught a glimpse of the someone on the side before. Now the big man straightened his belt, smoothed his thinning hair, and got into the car. Zacky's lips moved in a silent curse, a scream of alarm that resounded all the way to Africa, where his father drove a bulldozer for Israel Waterworks. The boys stood frozen at the window. Aron was sad that Gideon had seen the someone on the side, his Gideon, who was so pure and noble; whenever Zacky told one of his jokes, he and Aron would laugh politely and look away. A moment passed, and they stood together in silence, afraid to budge, and then Zacky's mother stepped out on the balcony, wearing her bathrobe, and called him home for lunch. Lunch she feeds him at five in the afternoon, said Mama as the green Fiat drove by; we're not inviting *her* to the bar mitzvah, and that's that. I will not shake hands with *her* after *him*. She's calling you, said Aron quietly. Mind your own business, growled Zacky, I'm not hungry, let's look around some more.

They lingered in the semidarkness for a while, and then slowly, like sprats in a stream, began to drift through the corridor into Edna Bloom's bedroom, where they circled quietly, past the neatly made bed, the ornamental mirror above her dressing table, the tiny basin ... and the nylon stocking draped over the chair. Zacky and Gideon peeked at each other, and bright red stains spread over their faces, but Aron noticed nothing, he had just been overwhelmed by a painting that went on for half the wall. "Get a load of him." Zacky signaled Gideon, who saw what was happening and quickly grabbed Aron's hand. Let's go, Ari, he murmured uneasily, you'll get in trouble if you hang around. But Aron only shook his hand off and continued staring at the fettered horse in the foreground, mimicking the lips that curled with strain; "Modern art" they call this crap? But his eyes bulged out with the gasping horse. Move, wake up! called Gideon, as Aron spotted the dead man under the horse, and then recognized the shape of the

bull, only its eyes were in the wrong place, though strangely enough they looked right that way; and then he saw the tortured faces, the fractured bodies, and the woman hovering in the background, lamp in hand. He tried to fight it, this “modern art,” and staggered out of the salon—Where’d they go, I’m stranded—but he found himself staring at the picture again, this is ridiculous, even I can draw a better horse, I can definitely draw a better bull, with all the practice I’ve had copying the label on Green Cow cheese. But suddenly there were tears in his eyes, big, slow drops from a secret well. What’s the matter, dum-dum, you’re crying like a girl? I am not. Are too. If Papa could only see you now! Who cares. Let him laugh at me. Let him run home and tell Mama. Little Aron’s going “artistic” on us, going inallecual!

Ari! Gideon called impatiently from the doorway. He was sick of waiting. But Aron didn’t answer. Gideon peered around the room till his eyes rested on an enormous pink-lipped conch adorning the shelf. Where does she find this sickening stuff, he sneered, thinking, Hurry up, she’ll catch us, as he nearly ran out, but stopped himself and turned to stare again at the baffling conch that seemed almost to come alive and squeeze itself around an invisible object. Goodbye! He was out of there, jumping three stairs at a time with Zacky close behind him, shaking off the prissiness of Miss Edna Bloom, her and her paintings and her matchstick furniture, but Aron, they knew, would yell at them later for running out on him.

Aron shook a fascinating paperweight, watched the snow falling on a lonesome mountaineer, and kept him company through the blizzard. By the entrance door there was a display of soldier dolls in uniform, the kind Shimmik and Itka collected from their trips abroad, only hers were arranged in a grand parade of trim guardsmen and mustachioed gendarmes, from Greece and Turkey, and England and France, like a great international army; and

then, casually, Aron went back to the painting. First he faced it, then he turned away, then he turned back to gape at it some more, shutting his eyes, surrendering with open arms, backing off with a little dance, meandering like a lost panther, like a spy colliding with his mirror image, scratching where his skin tingled, glancing over his shoulder, what if it came off the wall and started following him, and a flower blooms out of the sword in the dead man's hand, and suddenly you see the eyes everywhere, run for your life.

Edna Bloom's had purity. Oho, just look at those surfaces, hissed Mama in his brain, look at this dust, but to him it was stardust, and someday a knight would come riding into this enchanted castle and break the spell, and then—Aron shivered and hugged himself.

He paused in front of the refrigerator. You think this is a cupboard you can open any time you like? If you want something, ask me. He pulled the handle. Amazing. Starvation corner, rasped Mama's voice: a vegetarian refrigerator. A spinster's kitchen. I tell you it's unnatural! It is, he agreed, so white, so empty, no meat, no chicken, no salami, no medicine vials or stools to take to the clinic; there was hardly anything in there, except for a couple of shriveled cucumbers, a jar of sour cream, a bottle of milk, half an apple wrapped in a napkin, a bowl of cottage cheese. Yet in a way it was beautiful, unspoiled. He stood and stared, eager to learn more, the secret of her ascetic code. Are you crazy? She'll be here any minute, she'll catch you red-handed. No, she would never do anything to hurt me: My gallant knight, you've come at last. And then he hurried to the toilet and peed luxuriously, who knows, someday he might even bring himself to poop in here; to rehearse the possibility he pulled his pants down and sat on the toilet, all sweetness and light, dangling his trouser-bound legs; behind the door was another picture, of a kneeling bull and a beautiful lady stroking its back. Sure,

why not, he could do it here. Masterfully he pulled the chain, smiled at the water swirling in the bowl. No fear of disgusting surprises in this toilet.

Aron took one last peek through the blinds. Mama and Papa were about to disappear into the house, but just as they reached the fig tree, Edna Bloom approached from the opposite direction, slender, boyish Edna Bloom, with her fuzzy yellow hair shining between the leaves. Okay, let's see if you have any guts now. Good evening, Miss Bloom. Good evening to you, Mrs. Kleinfeld, Mr. Kleinfeld. You seem a little tired today, Miss Bloom. Well, I have to work for a living, Mrs. Kleinfeld. Yes, but you're awfully pale. Ha, did you see that, Moshe, the way she blushed when she looked at you? Oi, Hindaleh, you're imagining things, a girl like her and a man like me. You should relax more, take things easy, Miss Bloom, you have your whole life ahead of you. Ha, any minute she'll miss the boat. What are you talking about, Hindaleh, she's just a girl. Allow me to be the judge of such matters, Moshe, to you she may seem young enough, but I looked at her teeth and teeth don't lie, she's thirty-eight if she's a day. So, maybe she isn't interested in men. Not interested? Ha! Don't you see the way she devours you with her eyes, the little lemaleh, butter wouldn't melt, pshhhhi, pshhhhi— Bye-bye, Miss Bloom, take care now. Yes, thank you, goodbye. And Aron watches her trail away; twenty-five seconds left to lock the door with his passkey, but he can't resist one last look, and now she's in the building, now she's walking up the stairs, now she's on the second floor, run for your life.

Wait.

Because as soon as Mama and Papa turned their backs she played a trick on them: instead of walking up the stairs to her apartment, she waited in the hallway till they disappeared into Entrance B, and then, breathless and birdlike, she reappeared, and Aron's heart soared, so she too had tricks, she too had secrets, and she rested under

the leafy branches of the fig tree, surrendering to it like a girlish bride, breathing in its fragrance, her delicate hand on the massive trunk. And suddenly she trembled. Papa was there. He had returned. How did he know? He approached the tree and stood beside her. A hunk of a man, twice her size. A bull and a crane. But where was Mama? The broad leaves rustled, concealing, revealing. "Moshe!" She called Papa from afar. Papa hunched his shoulders. Then he reached up and tapped one of the branches. A cloud of tiny insects swarmed through the air. Edna recoiled. Papa looked away. "Moshe!" shouted Mama from the hallway, key in hand. "Where did he go?" "See, I had this feeling, Miss Bloom," said Papa, his words fluttering up to the fourth-floor window. "What feeling, Mr. Kleinfeld?" She tilted her chin up but avoided his eyes. A blush spread over her smooth white neck, visible only to Aron. "The fig tree is sick," said Papa simply. Their eyes did not meet. They spoke through the tree. "My fig tree, sick?" whispered Edna Bloom, saddened, shocked, though the tree belonged to everyone.

By the time Mama came down again, all three boys were standing under the fig tree with Edna Bloom. A single glance was enough for Mama. There was something murky in her eyes. High and low she hunted for Papa, squinting suspiciously up at the tree. At last she caught sight of his fleshy red heels flopping around. Controlling her temper she called his name. The leaves fluttered, and Papa's sunny face popped out between the branches. "Oioioi," he greeted her. "This tree is covered with sores, Mamaleh, it needs a good wiping." Mama pursed her lips and squeezed her collar tight. Then she turned abruptly and hurried home.

2

THE NEXT DAY, after stopping by the Romanian apothecary's on his way home from work, Papa showered, changed into a clean undershirt, and sat down at the "little cripple" table in the pantry to prepare an ointment for the fig tree. First he mixed the powders, then he added water and squeezed in a tube of smelly goo, his big red face puckering with concentration as he stirred. Mama was watching over his shoulder. When a tree is sick, she sneered, you have to be ruthless and whack off the rotten branches, as anyone with half a brain and a little instinct would tell you. That's the only way to get the healthy ones to grow. Papa merely nodded, carefully measuring out a few drops from a tiny vial, with his tongue pressed tightly between his teeth.

Then he climbed on the rickety Franzousky in the kitchen and rummaged through the storage loft. Cascades of dust spilled down as Mama watched him, till suddenly she felt the zetz in her heart, and sure enough, when she ran out to the balcony there was Grandma Lilly leaning over the rail, halfway to the next world. Mama grabbed her by the arm and dragged her back to the alcove. Lie down, Mamchu, supper isn't ready yet, why are you staring like that, it's me, Hinda, no one's going to slit your throat; there, legs up, lie down straight, stop crying, it's time for your nap; see the pretty pictures on the wall, see the parrots and the monkeys on the trees, you made them, Mamchu, that's your embroidery. Now you just rest awhile. And she covered Grandma Lilly up to her chin with the Scottish plaid, and tucked the corners under the mattress, and went huffing back to the kitchen. "You and your meshuggeneh schemes, Moshe," she said, slapping the nylon bags over the sink to dry with the wax paper from the

margarine. "Your own mother nearly throws herself off the balcony, and here you are still futzing around; honestly, you are so stubborn." "I found it," he hollered, deep in the storage loft, and emerged with a headful of dusty curls, holding a kidney-shaped palette in his hand. "I knew I put it away up there."

Carefully he climbed off the rickety Franzousky and wiped the dust and paint from Yochi's palette. "You'd better make sure she doesn't need that anymore," whispered Mama. "You know Yochi, she'll have a fit." "Take it, go on, take everything," screamed Yochi from the bedroom, "I'll never be an artist anyway." Or a dancer either, she muttered angrily to herself, I should have kept on with my painting, though, then no one would care that my legs are fat.

Papa went out and closed the door, carefully balancing the palette with the ointment. Outside, Aron and Zacky Smitanka were playing Traffic on their bikes. Aron dipped like a matador, swerving so fast he didn't see the fierce red face coming at him till he found himself lying on the pavement with Zacky's bicycle jammed between his wheels.

Papa set the palette down and rushed over to the boys. "You rat, you dirty creep!" shrieked Aron, choking back the tears as Papa locked him in his burly arms. "Just wait, I'll make mincemeat out of you!" He waved his little fists at Zacky, kicking furiously. "Let me at him, let me at him!" Zacky, alarmed by what he'd done, thrashed back halfheartedly, cursing Aron, calling him a lousy cheater. "Trying to mess with me, Kleinfeld? Huh? Huh? Trying to mess with me?" he screamed, aiming higher because he couldn't think of anything better to say. Papa hoisted Zacky up with his free hand and roared with laughter as he held the two boys face to face, and let them swing at each other: wiry little Aron wriggled in the air, heaping abuse on Zacky and his bike, and Zacky screamed back: "You trying to mess with me? Huh? Huh?," his snub-nosed face burning

with indignation. A sudden squeeze reduced them both to silence. Roaring with laughter Papa let them down, and they reeled on the ground with all the fight knocked out of them. Zacky got his wind back and started to whine that Aron was playing dirty, trying to be a wise guy. But those are the rules, burred Aron, you ride up, you lunge, and then you ride away as fast as you can; was it his fault Zacky was such a klutz, such a golem and a turtle and a snail? Papa frowned at the torrent of words. "All right!" he shouted. "Sha! We heard you the first time, big mouth!" Instantly he regretted his sharpness of tone, and tousled Aron's soft yellow hair; then, noticing the miserable expression in Zacky's eyes, gave him a big hug and scratched his bristly head. The two boys took comfort in the warmth of Papa's hands, and Zacky sidled up to feel the prickly hair on his leg.

"Off, you two, go play, and if I hear you brawling again, you gonna be sorry." Aron was the first to break away, and Papa patted Zacky on the shoulder. "A-shockel, Zachary, get on your bike and ride. I'll keep an eye on you from the tree."

Papa climbed up the fig tree and seated himself comfortably on a branch. Aron gripped the bike wheel between his knees and tried to straighten it. Papa parted the leaves and asked Zacky to fetch him the palette he'd left on the fence. Aron pressed down on the fender so hard it nearly cut his skin.

Papa leaned back. The leaves reached out to caress his face, to nuzzle him like friendly colts. He breathed in the muskiness of the fig tree and ran his hands around its ample trunk. Then he kicked off his plastic scuffs, startling Zacky, who was on his way back to the tree, and making him jump like a frightened kitten.

Solemnly, deliberately, like a craftsman spreading his tools out, Papa cracked his knuckles one by one. Then he shook himself and inspected the tree. There were sores on

the branches: lesions infested with little white worms. The sores ran all the way up the tree, and Papa followed them with his eyes to the fourth-floor window. He thought he noticed Edna's curtain flutter and crossed his arms over his barrel chest. This would not be an easy job.

He took a roll of flannel out of his pocket, deftly tore a piece off, and poked the sore. A sticky gold fluid soaked through the cloth. He sniffed, nodded wonderingly, shrugged his shoulders, and tossed the rag down. Zacky glanced anxiously up at Papa's feet. He studied the flannel, took a whiff, made a face, and buried his nose in it, inhaling with rapture.

Papa wound a fresh piece of flannel around his finger and softly whistled a half-forgotten tune, which in his rendition sounded somber and vague: suddenly Mama poked her head out the window and searched for him between the leaves. She knew where Papa's mind was whenever he whistled that way. He began to swab the little hole. A bloated worm wriggled blindly in his palm, and Papa examined it, whistling out of the corner of his mouth. Long ago in Poland, a wily Communist named Zioma had talked Papa into fleeing with him over the border to join the Red Army. Oi, Zioma, Zioma, you momzer you. Mama slammed the window shut. This fig tree business was all she needed now. She tried to concentrate on polishing the fleishik knives. Papa had told her once about his childhood in Poland, about the escape to Russia and his three years in the army, about the detention camp at Komi, and his lurid flight from the taiga and the peasant's wife, but she had covered his mouth with her strong little hand and said, Enough already, Moshe, I don't want to hear any more, after I'm gone you can tell the world, you can shout it from the rooftops for all I care, but not here, not in my home, in my home I refuse to hear such things; and when the children were born, she made him swear never to speak of those terrible times. There's no reason they should know

their father was an animal, so he promised her, with his patient nod and ever-ready smile; the only trouble was, she understood his whistling too. She opened the window and snapped her dust cloth on the sill. A small gray cloud flew up. The whistling ceased. Mama vanished into the house. Papa blew on the palm of his hand. The worm dropped off. He squashed it against the tree trunk with his heel, and quietly started to warble again.

Papa worked painstakingly, pausing only to explain to passing neighbors what he was doing up in the tree or to answer Hinda's calls. Two hours later, at six-thirty on the dot, when the signature tune of the evening newscast blared forth over every radio on the block, Papa rested from his labors and listened eagerly, but there was still no news of a devaluation. Aron rode up and down the street, ignoring Papa, Zacky, and the tree, veering around every so often to call his make-believe dog, Gummy, who chased his bike invisibly. Zacky stood dutifully at his post, collecting the filthy rags as they landed. How could a father leave a son like that and go off to make money in Africa, thought Papa. Then he brooded over Malka Smitanka, sending her child out so she could screw around. What does a woman like her see in that deadbeat, that slouch of an accountant, or lawyer, or whatever he was? True, he owns a car, sighed Papa, deploring the waste. Go ask Hinda for the enema bag, he shouted down to Zacky, and began to muse about the beauty mark on Malka's bosom and the sassy hair curling under her arms. "Got it!" cried Zacky, holding up the bag and startling Papa, who only sent him off again, gloomy-eyed, to tell Hinda he would soon be home.

Papa sat back, lit a cigarette, and puffed with pleasure. From his perch in the treetop he couldn't see the building project or the street. He might have been anywhere; and if he leaned to the right he could just make out the curtains fluttering in a certain window. But he didn't move. It was

June, and gallnuts hardened on the branches. A sweet fragrance enveloped him. He breathed it in.

Zacky shinned up the tree with the enema bag, and Papa winked to console him for the scolding, playfully scratching his bristly head again. "You sit here and watch," he ordered.

First he used the enema pump to dry out a sore, then he dipped a special brush into the ointment and carefully painted around the hole. Zacky stared open-mouthed at his gently moving hand. In the street below them, Aron was riding around calling "Gummy! Gummy!," his arms outstretched to make Gummy chase the bike. Papa finished painting the sore. "There," he said, looking at Zacky and passing him the enema bag. "Now you go 'phoo!' while I shmear on the ointment." Zacky pumped air into another sore, biting his tongue with the effort. They worked in silence side by side until Aron's fair head popped up between them. "How come he gets to do everything?" Aron whined. "It's my turn now."

Papa and Zacky recoiled from each other and Papa embarked on a loud explanation of how the healing process works. Zacky started cracking his knuckles, and Aron shuddered. Suddenly he had an idea. He slid down the tree and got his bicycle pump. It was a terrific idea, a brilliant idea, in fact. How quickly and efficiently the pump dried the sores. It's much faster this way, isn't it, he panted, all aglow. Yeah, growled Zacky. Noisier too.

The three of them worked together, swabbing sores, while Aron chattered to fill in the silence and make them laugh with his hilarious imitations of famous people; he did a fabulous one of the Prime Minister, even though his voice hadn't changed yet; well, what do you expect, he was only eleven and a half. Once he got started there was no stopping him, though little by little he too fell under the quiet spell of healing.

And suddenly Mama was on the balcony, calling Aron. Papa signaled the boys to keep still and they hid their heads behind the branches. Again she called him, certain he was there. I'm warning you, Aron, you're in for it. Papa cupped his hands over his mouth and gave a cuckoo cry, and the boys nearly burst with stifled laughter. In vain Mama searched for them, bobbing up and down, and then she turned on her heel and disappeared into the house. Now now, boys, laughed Papa, is that any way to behave? He gazed serenely at the sky and wound his thighs around the big warm tree.

3

FOR SEVEN DAYS Papa ministered to the fig tree: poking the sores, wiping them clean, daubing them with ointment. Again and again Mama stepped out on the balcony and shouted at him, what did she care who heard her, he was an idiot not to charge good money for all this work, let the Residents Association pay, they were responsible for the gardening, weren't they? But Papa knew how to sweet-talk Mama, and he stayed at his station in the tree. One day Zacky, arriving late, found Aron's little bicycle propped against the trunk and went pedaling off in circles like a jilted lover. Slowly, painstakingly, Papa and Aron worked their way up the branches. They put their heads together and examined the sores. Whenever Papa's undershirt hiked up Aron glimpsed the pale scar under his hairy red potbelly, like a silky gap in Papa's brawn that never ceased to fascinate him. You didn't get that at the camp in Komi, did you? he asked, knowing better, in an attempt to pump Papa for a trickle of forbidden memories, and Papa laughed: Not likely, not at Komi, there they left you to die like a dog. No, this is from the appendix operation in Poland, when I was about your age or a little older maybe; and then, forgetting his promise to Mama, he spoke about the terrible winter in the taiga when the earth froze so hard they couldn't bury the dead, and anyone fool enough to try to escape was found next day half-gnawed by the wolves, and some of the prisoners went crazy from hunger and fear, they went out of their minds like you go out of a room, and the worst were the inallethuals Stalin sent there, they went crazy not because they suffered more, a body is a body, same for everyone, but because ... because ... He shrugged his shoulders. I don't know ... maybe they couldn't believe it

was happening, they thought the world was inane like them, not like Stalin ... Papa laughed and Aron laughed with him, intently watching his face.

Sometimes Edna Bloom came out for a walk and approached the tree with her dainty parasol. Papa would watch her and part the leaves, startling her every time, though she knew by now that he was a kindly giant. Oh, Mr. Kleinfeld, you gave me a fright, she gasped wide-eyed, hand on her heart, and in the silence that followed, the empty lull, she seemed suddenly transported, awaiting her own return, but then, smiling meekly, gulping solicitously, she inquired about the welfare of her fig tree. Aron thought her very beautiful, in spite of her peculiar pink coloring, which made her look almost transparent, like a newborn chick with a throbbing heart. If not for this fig tree, she confided one evening, I would have moved out of the neighborhood long ago. Uh-oh, thought Aron, she made a mistake, though what it was, he didn't know. And the next day she said she felt close to the tree, those were her words, she said that sometimes she almost felt like pouring her heart out to it, which made Aron wince again, how could she say things like that to strangers. But Edna wasn't accustomed to talking to her neighbors, even after thirteen years among them, she kept her distance. I'll show her, said Mama, I'll grab her by the roots and teach her to be civil, or at least to say hello to me. Now Aron hung his head and Papa muttered something, and he blushed even more. Edna seemed to sense she'd made a mistake, but she was in great high spirits so she quickly forgave herself, waving a jolly goodbye, and promising to return next day, same time, same place. Aron smiled at Papa. He tried to catch his eye as she walked away, but Papa avoided looking at him and said, Quick, start blowing on the sores.

Edna hurried upstairs and ran breathlessly to the curtain. A breeze was blowing, rustling the leaves, making shadows flicker on Papa's back. She could see the thick of

his neck, the fleshly nape. She could put him together like a jigsaw puzzle, here a biceps, there a shin; and when he twisted his arm around she glimpsed the scar on it winding through the leaves like a tropical snake. His hefty legs swung down beside the scrawny boy's, and she wondered how the son would ever grow up to be a man. Suddenly her eyes twinkled with a rare gleam of mischief, and she dashed to the kitchen to make a pitcher of lemonade. With a giggle and a blush and an Edna-what's-come-over-you, she poured the lemon concentrate and sugar in the water and gave it a vigorous stir. But as she approached the window her hands went limp. What, would she lean out the window, call him by name, and hand him the drinks ... maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all. Still carrying the pitcher, she paced through the rooms, vexed and disappointed with herself.

A curious silence descended over the block. In steamy kitchens, red-faced housewives looked up from their tasks. Husbands dozing under the newspaper on their balcony lounge chairs sat up and listened. The distant strains of a Chopin mazurka trickled through the dreary building project, over the rusty banisters, the spatterdash entrance walls and crooked mailboxes, and out to the sickly yellow lawn. For years she hadn't touched the piano, now she was playing again.

Up in the fig tree, Papa and Aron peered shyly into each other's eyes and quickly looked away. Papa was busy wiping a sore, patiently probing it with his fingers. Aron considered asking for a new guitar as a bar mitzvah present. He remembered the time he caught Mama watching him play the old one; that was a mistake, she had walked in and seen the look in his eyes. You're giving me a hole in the head, she shouted. Go outside and play with your friends, we didn't spend half Papa's salary to buy you a bicycle so you'd stay in here hunched over your guitar all day, and really, the bike was great, he loved it, only he

wanted something more. What it was, though, he couldn't say. More, that's all. But they had already decided what to give him for his bar mitzvah, a savings account, that's what, so that twenty years from now he would be able to buy an apartment for his wife. His wife? Who cared about his wife. Maybe he could still talk them into buying him a guitar. Tenderly he strummed the tree, accompanying Edna, and then he rubbed the chicken-pox scar on his chin; and Papa had another bar mitzvah present to give him, a very special one: the army shaving kit with the razor and the shaving soap and the little tray he used in the Sinai campaign. But all Aron wanted was a guitar; and again he strummed the tree and rubbed his chin and strummed again, with the dreamy look of a medieval scribe dipping his quill into the inkpot.

Even though the big event was still a year and a half away, Mama and Papa were up to their ears in arrangements. They were planning a grandiose affair, said Mama, they would rent the Empyrean Hall and hire an expensive photographer from Photo Gwartz this time instead of using old Uncle Shimmik, whose hands trembled so badly at the last family affair that Mama came out looking hideous. Yochi's bat mitzvah party had been celebrated modestly at home, and now she flew into a jealous rage. On me you scrimp, she exploded, and Mama replied, with a hint of malice, that a bar mitzvah is different, like it or not. Don't worry, we'll make it up to you with your wedding, only first let's see the suitors, ha ha ha.

At night when Aron got up for a drink, he would find his parents huddled together over the big bar mitzvah ledger on the kitchen table. Cast aside were the Sick Fund stampbooks—who had time for them nowadays—the reddish-yellow stamps were glued on any which way, while the ledger was carefully bound in green shelf paper with a label on the cover: ARON'S BAR MITZVAH. Here his parents entered the menu of every bar mitzvah they attended,

reckoned the costs, counted courses, criticized and compared the cuisine. In a year and a half the mortgage would be paid up, and they would take out a little loan, which, together with what they'd managed to put by already, would be enough to throw him such a bar mitzvah party, Mama clasped him to her bosom, "Their eyes will pop!"

Now she appeared on the balcony, searching high and low, her nostrils flaring. Papa yanked Aron back into the tree as stealthily as a guerrilla fighter, till both of them were safely hidden from her scrutiny. All Aron could see now through the leaves were her fingers turning white on the balcony railing.

"Moshe!" she shrieked, "how long do you intend to stay up there wiping snot?" A hush fell over the building. The tinkling of the piano died away.

Papa tucked his neck between his shoulders, then pushed it out again, thick and red, with a throbbing blue vein. Aron cringed. He had never seen Papa like this before, but Papa controlled himself, clenched his powerful jaws, and gravely, deliberately, began to smear the ointment on the sores. Mama waited, and then suddenly pounded on the railing: "A-ron!"—the sound waves encircled him like iron rings around a pole— "come home this instant to try on your boots!"

"What? But it's summer!" he whispered to Papa.

Papa nodded. His eyes still intimated danger, but his chin dredged up an old excuse: "That's Mama for you, she likes to have things ready in advance," he whispered. "Suppose we have to buy you a new pair of boots this year?"

But of course they would have to, the old pair was two years old, all worn out, with cracks in the soles. He definitely needed a new pair of boots: he and Gideon and Zacky were planning to open a tadpole farm, they were

going to sell frogs to Bonaparte's, the first French restaurant in Jerusalem.

"What is it," whispered Papa. "Why the long face?"

Aron turned away so Papa wouldn't see him. "Why does she have to talk to me like that," he grumbled.

"Don't take it to heart, Aronchik, your mama loves you. She worries, that's why she talks like that."

"I'm as tall as Gideon, I'm as tall as most of the kids in my class."

"She wants you to be the best in everything, that's all. A mother is a mother."

"She hurt my feelings."

Papa stroked his head. Aron melted at the touch. Again the piano tinkled upstairs, tentative, wary, like the first green sprouts after a forest fire. Papa sat still. Only his hand moved, stroking Aron. There was still enough light to see the veins on the leaves. The music fluttered through them, plucking delicate strings. Aron peeked up at the sky, the deep blue sky of twilight. And then Papa stared into his eyes until he made him smile.

"Anyway," said Papa, "what's-his-name, Napoleon, he was a shorty, and so was Zioma Schwatznicker, now that's a fact!"

4

ARON FOUND MAMA in the kitchen, wobbling on the Franzousky with her head in the storage loft. Hearing him enter, she popped out again wearing a pink rubber bathing cap to protect her from the dust. Don't think I didn't see you in the tree, that we'll settle later, now go get a pair of woolen socks from the sock drawer in the big closet. Woolen socks? grumbled Aron. Now? In the middle of summer? How do you expect to try on boots, then? Barefoot? But in this heat, Mama, wool? I know what I'm doing, now go get the socks.

Angrily he opened the closet in his parents' bedroom. Behind the sock drawer he found a little brown envelope, like the kind that came in the mail with Papa's reserve orders, only this one had no name or address on it. Printed across the envelope were the words *Alfonso's Pussy Circus*. He peeked inside and saw something strange, a black-and-white photograph on the back of a playing card. He knew at a glance this was something he shouldn't be looking at. But when he peeked again, his hands began to tremble. Close the door and get out, he commanded himself. Close the door and get out, he whispered to save his soul, then slipped the card into the envelope and put it back, trembling so much he almost dropped the socks. He stood frozen in the middle of the bedroom. What was I looking for? And again he commanded, with a quivering voice, Get out of here now! I said now! Then he stumbled to his room and flopped down on the bed, to calm himself before Mama found the boots in the storage loft. He curled up in a ball and suddenly realized that things had not been going at all well lately. There were certain signs, like the broken guitar strings or the fights with Zacky, though what did they

prove, what did they mean, he only knew that up until now, it might have been possible to turn back the wheel of signs and proofs. He didn't think, he only tried to listen to the sober voice inside him whisper: "Not good," and "Tsk tsk tsk," like a doctor's prognosis, and Aron was startled, not by the voice, but by the gravity of the "Tsk tsk tsk" and the shake of the head that accompanied it, like Mama's that time they passed a fatal road accident on the bus to Tel Aviv, and suddenly he recoiled at the thought. Nothing's changed, he told himself, it's just a mood, get up, but he didn't.

The day was over; a lazy summer evening stretched ahead. From every doorway came smells of salad finely chopped, dewy cucumbers in yogurt, herring wreathed with onion, eggs dancing sunny side up, fresh rye bread thickly sliced and ready on the table. The sultry sky began to darken at the seams. Blithe new strains floated through the fourth-floor window—hesitant at first, measured and slow, then breaking loose in a rampage of pounding. Papa sighed and collected his tools from the fig tree. He looked down at his fingers, stained yellow with the ointment, as he listened to the music, wrinkling his brow in an effort to remember where he'd heard it before. He shrugged his shoulders. Hinda's voice boomed out, she'd found the boots and was calling Aron to try them on. Just as he jumped down from the fig tree, Zacky rode over. "You mean to say you've been up there alone the whole time?" He scowled in innocent dismay. "Go on home now, it's getting dark," said Papa, and Zacky stared down at his bicycle fender and said he didn't feel like going home yet. But it's dangerous to ride around without a light, Zachary; Don't have one—dynamo's out. Remind me tomorrow and I'll fix it for you: never fear—Moishe's here. And Papa scratched his prickly hair, but his mind was elsewhere, his hand perfunctory, and Zacky drew back with indignation and quickly rode away, pouting as he leaned over the handlebars. Oh, please let a car speed by