

Magic & childhood

by Etgar Keret

Three tales of innocence from Israel

Etgar Keret's book "Missing Kissinger" (Chatto & Windus) is out in March

Hat trick

"Allakazeem--Allakazam!" and out it comes

At the end of the show, I pull a rabbit out of a hat. I always do it at the end, because kids love animals. At least I did when I was a kid. That way I can end the show on a high note, at the point when I pass the rabbit around so the kids can pet it and feed it. At least, that's how it used to be once. It's harder with today's kids; they don't get as excited. But still, I leave the rabbit for the end. It's the trick I love the most, or rather, it was the trick I loved the most. My eyes stay fixed on the audience, as my hand reaches into the hat, groping deep inside it till it feels Kazam's ears.

And then "Allakazeem--Allakazam!" and out it comes. It never fails to surprise them. And not only them--me too. Every time my hand touches those funny ears inside the hat I feel like a magician. And even though I know how it's done, the hollow space in the table and all that, it still seems like genuine witchcraft.

That Saturday afternoon in the suburbs, I left the hat trick to the end like I always do. The kids at that birthday party were incredibly blasé. Some of them had their backs to me, watching a Schwarzenegger movie on cable. The birthday boy wasn't even in the room, he was playing with his new video game. My audience had dwindled to a total of about four kids. It was a particularly stifling day. I was sweating like crazy under my magician's suit. All I wanted was to get it over with and go home. So I skipped over three rope tricks and went straight to the hat. My hand disappeared deep inside it and my eyes sank into the eyes of a chubby girl with glasses. The soft touch of Kazam's ears took me by surprise the way it always does. "Allakazeem--Allakazam!" One more minute in the father's den and I'm out of there, with a 300-shekel cheque in my pocket. I pulled Kazam by the ears and something about him felt a little strange, lighter. My hand swung up in the air, my eyes still fixed on the audience. And then--suddenly there was this wetness on my wrist and the chubby girl started to scream. In my right hand I was holding Kazam's head, with his long ears and wide-open rabbit eyes. Just the head, no body. The head, and lots and lots of blood. The chubby girl kept screaming. The kids sitting with their backs to me turned away from the TV and started applauding me. The birthday kid with the new video game came in from the other room and, when he saw the severed head, started whistling enthusiastically. I could feel my lunch rising to my throat. I vomited into my magician's hat, and the

vomit disappeared. The kids around me were ecstatic.

That night, I didn't sleep a wink. I checked my gear over and over again. I had no explanation for what had happened. Couldn't find the rest of Kazam either. In the morning, I went to the magicians' shop. They were baffled too. I bought a rabbit. The salesman tried to talk me into getting a turtle. "Rabbits are passé," he said. "Turtles are in these days. Tell 'em it's a ninja turtle and their jaws will drop."

I bought a rabbit anyway. I named it Kazam too. When I got home, I found five messages on my answering machine. All of them job offers. All from kids who'd been at the performance. In one of them, the kid even insisted that I leave the severed head behind just like I'd done at the party. It was only then that I realised I hadn't taken Kazam's head with me.

My next performance was on Wednesday. A ten year old in one of the classiest neighbourhoods was having a birthday. I was stressed out all through the show. Couldn't focus. I slipped up on the trick with the queen of hearts. All I could think about was the hat. Finally it was time: "Allakazeem--Allakazam!" The penetrating look at the audience, the hand into the hat. I couldn't find the ears, but the body was the right weight. Smooth, but the right weight. And then the screaming again. Screaming, but applause too. It wasn't a rabbit I was holding, it was a dead baby.

I can't do that trick any more. I used to love it, but just thinking about it now makes my hands shake. I keep imagining the awful things I'll wind up pulling out of there, the things waiting inside. Last night I dreamt I put my hand into the hat and it was caught in the jaws of a monster. I find it hard to understand how I used to have the courage to push my hand into that dark place. How I used to have the courage to shut my eyes and fall asleep.

I don't perform at all any more, but I don't really care. I don't earn a living, but that's fine too. Sometimes I still put on the suit at home, just for kicks, or I check the secret space in the table under the hat, but that's all. Other than that I keep away from magic tricks; other than that I don't do anything. I just lie awake in bed and think about the rabbit's head and the dead baby. Like they're clues to a riddle; like someone was trying to tell me something, that this isn't the best time for rabbits, or for babies either. That this isn't really the right time for magicians.

Shoes

Touching my Adidas stripes, I thought of my grandfather

On Holocaust Commemoration day, our teacher, Sarah, took us on the No 57 bus to the Vohlin Memorial Museum and I felt really important. All the kids in my class had families that came from Iraq, except me and my cousin and one other kid, Druckman; and I was the only one whose grandfather died in the Holocaust. The Vohlin Memorial Museum was a really

fancy building, all covered in expensive-looking black marble. It had a lot of sad pictures in black and white and lists of people and countries and victims. We paired up and walked along the wall, from one picture to the next, and the teacher said not to touch, but I did. I touched one of them, a cardboard photograph of a pale and skinny man who was crying and holding a sandwich. The tears running down his cheeks were like the stripes on an asphalt street, and Orit Salem, the girl I was paired up with, said she'd tell the teacher on me. I said that as far as I was concerned, she could tell everyone, even the principal, I didn't care. That was my grandfather, and I could touch whatever I wanted.

After the pictures, they took us into a big hall and showed us a movie about little kids being loaded onto a truck. They all choked on gas in the end. After that this skinny old guy came up on the stage and told us how the Nazis were scum and murderers and how he got back at them and even strangled a soldier to death with his bare hands.

Djerbi, who was sitting next to me, said the old man was lying and, from the looks of him, there wasn't a soldier in the world he could beat up. But I looked into the old man's eyes and I believed him. There was so much anger in them that all the attacks from all the hotshot punks in the world seemed like small change by comparison.

In the end, after he was finished telling us about what he'd done in the Holocaust, the old man said that everything we'd heard was important, not just for the past but for what was happening now, too. Because the Germans were still living and they still had a country. The old man said he'd never forgive them and he hoped we wouldn't either, and that we should never ever visit their country, God forbid. Because when he and his parents had arrived in Germany fifty years ago everything looked really nice and it ended in hell. People have a short memory sometimes, he said, especially for bad things. They prefer to forget. But don't you forget. Every time you see a German, remember what I told you. And every time you see anything that was made in Germany, even if it's a TV, because most of the companies that make TVs, or anything else, are in Germany, always remember that the picture tube and other parts underneath the pretty wrapping were made out of the bones and skin and flesh of dead Jews.

On our way out, Djerbi said again that if that old man had strangled so much as a cucumber, he'd eat his t-shirt. And I thought it was lucky our fridge was made in Israel, 'cos who needs trouble.

Two weeks later, my parents came back from abroad and brought me a pair of trainers. My older brother had told my mother that's what I wanted, and she bought the best ones. Mum smiled when she handed them to me. She was sure I didn't know what was in the bag. But I could tell right away by the Adidas logo. I took the shoebox out of the bag and said thank you. The box was rectangular, like a coffin. And inside it lay two white shoes with three blue stripes on them, and on the side it said Adidas Rom. I didn't have to open the box to know that. "Let's try them on," Mum said, pulling the paper out. "To see if they fit." She was smiling the whole time, she didn't realise what was happening.

"They're from Germany, you know," I told her and squeezed her hand hard.

"Of course I know," Mum smiled. "Adidas is the best make in the world."

"Grandpa was from Germany too," I tried hinting.

"Grandpa was from Poland," Mum corrected me. She grew sad for a moment, but it passed right away, and she put one of the shoes on my foot and started lacing it up. I didn't say anything. I knew by then it was no use. Mum was clueless. She had never been to the Vohlin Memorial Museum. Nobody had ever explained it to her. And for her, shoes were just shoes and Germany was really Poland. So I let her put them on my feet and I didn't say anything. There was no point telling her. It would just make her sadder.

After I said thank you one more time and gave her a kiss on the cheek, I said I was going out to play. "Watch it, eh?" Dad kidded from his armchair in the living room. "Don't you go wearing down the soles in a single afternoon." I took another look at the pale shoes on my feet, and thought back about all the things the old man who'd strangled a soldier said we should remember. I touched the Adidas stripes again, and remembered my grandpa in the cardboard photograph. "Are the shoes comfortable?" Mum asked. "Of course they're comfortable," my brother answered instead of me. "Those shoes aren't just some cheap local brand, they're the very same shoe that Cruyff used to wear." I tiptoed slowly towards the door, trying to put as little weight on them as possible. I kept walking that way towards Independence Park. Outside, the kids from Borocho Elementary were forming three groups: Holland, Argentina and Brazil. The Holland group was one player short so they agreed to let me join, even though they usually never took anyone who didn't go to Borocho.

When the game started, I still remembered to be careful not to kick with the tip, so I wouldn't hurt Grandpa, but as it continued, I forgot, just like the old man at the Vohlin Memorial Museum said people do, and I even scored the tiebreaker with a volley. After the game was over, I remembered and looked down at them. They were so comfortable all of a sudden, and springier too, much more than they'd seemed when they were still in the box. "What a volley that was, eh?" I reminded Grandpa on our way home. "The goalie didn't know what hit him." Grandpa didn't say a thing, but from the lilt in my step I could tell he was happy too.

Hope they die

My parents promised to come, the lying sons-of-bitches

For Hanukkah vacation my parents sent me to a sleep-away camp for the whole week. From the minute I got there I hated it, and all I wanted to do was cry. The other kids were happy all the time. I couldn't figure out why, and it only made me want to cry even more. All day long I went from one activity to another, and to the swimming pool with my lips pursed, not saying a word, so the kids wouldn't hear the tears in my voice and start picking on me.

That night, after lights out, I waited a few minutes and then headed straight for the phone booth next to the dining room. It was raining outside, and I ran through the puddles barefoot, with just my pyjamas on. The chill in the air caused my mouth to open, and out came these squeals that weren't even in my own voice. It scared the hell out of me. I dialled our home number, and Dad answered. All the way to the phone, I'd been hoping it would be Mum, but now, with the cold air and the rain and those squeals coming out of my throat, I didn't care any more. I told him to come and get me. And then the real crying started. He was a little mad, and asked maybe twice what was wrong, and then he let me talk to Mum. I just kept crying, couldn't get out a single word.

"We're coming to get you right away," Mum said. I heard Dad mumble something and Mum snap at him in Polish. "Did you hear me, Dandush?" she said again. "We're coming to get you right away. Wait for us in your room. It's cold outside and you've got a cough. Wait for us in your room. Don't worry, we'll find it."

I hung up and ran to the gate. I sat down on the curb and waited for them to come. I knew it would take them more than an hour. I didn't have a watch, so I kept trying different ways of counting in my head. I was cold and hot all at the same time, and they didn't come. By my calculation, I'd been waiting for more than two hundred years. The sun was starting to show and they didn't come. They said they'd come, the lying sons of bitches. I hope they die. I went on crying even though I didn't have it in me any more. Finally, one of the counsellors found me and took me to the infirmary. They gave me a pill and I wouldn't talk to anyone.

At noon, this woman with glasses came in and whispered something to the nurse. The nurse nodded and whispered back, loud enough for me to overhear: "Poor little thing. He must have sensed it."

The one with the glasses said something else to the nurse, and the nurse answered her out loud: "For your information, Mrs Bella, I'm an educated woman, not some illiterate from the boonies, but there are things that even science can't explain."

Then my older brother Eli came. He stood in the doorway looking kind of stooped and miserable, and kept trying to smile. After exchanging a few words with the nurse, he took me by the hand and we started walking towards the parking lot. He didn't even ask me to go get my stuff from my room.

"Mum and Dad promised to come and get me," I said, half crying.

"I know," he said, without looking at me. "I know."

"But they didn't!" I started to cry. "All night long I waited for them in the rain. Lying sons of bitches. I hope they die."

And then he swerved all of a sudden and slapped me. Not one of those slaps you give a kid to make him shut up. He slapped me as hard as he could. I could feel my feet leaving the ground, and me going up in the air and then falling. I was in shock. Eli was one of those brothers that teach you how to throw a pass, not the kind that hit you. I got up off the asphalt. My whole body ached, and my mouth had the salty taste of blood. I didn't cry, even though my jaw hurt like hell. But suddenly Eli started.

"Damn it," he said. "Damn it, I don't know what the hell to do." He sat down on the asphalt, crying. Then he calmed down a little and we drove back to Tel Aviv. The whole way he didn't say a thing. We got to the rented apartment where he was living. He'd just gotten out of the army and was sharing the place with someone.

"Your Mum," he said. "I mean, our Mum." We were quiet for a minute. "Mum and Dad, you know," he tried again, and stopped. Finally we'd both had enough. I was getting really hungry because I hadn't had a thing to eat since yesterday, so we went into the kitchen and he made me a scrambled egg.

Translated from Hebrew by Miriam Shlesinger

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