

NUMBER OF PEOPLE

A full-length play in one act

By Emilie Pascale Beck

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Note:

There are many shifts in Leo's thinking and conversation, indicated by the stage direction: "shift." He sometimes loses the thread of his thoughts and turns to another topic to divert attention from his loss of memory. Because of these shifts, stories are often left incomplete, so that the rhythm of his speech rarely reaches a conclusion. Instead, the interruptions force the sense of unfinished melodies throughout.

When he speaks, it is with the trace of an Eastern European accent.

Props indicated by quotation marks ("book," "table," etc.) in the script are not really there. Leo can see and "touch" them, but the audience can't. Certain props are real and these are noted.

All dialogue is addressed directly to the audience.

(Lights up on an old man, LEO GOLD, asleep in a chair. He is dressed in a black suit. The chair is surrounded by bookshelves. They might be empty, or there might be one or two books here and there. Otherwise, the stage is bare.

LEO jolts awake.)

LEO:

(Panic:) Who are you?

Did my daughter let you in?

She's always late. Always! Where she got it from, I don't know. Not from me this wasting of time. Never! I always told her, time is not yours to give away. Let it be on someone else's head, the wasting of time.

(Shift)

How long was I asleep?

I couldn't sleep...what's the expression? I couldn't sleep a winking last night. Visions kept going through my head. I couldn't stop them. Things I had forgotten...

And then when I *would* fall asleep, it was always the same dream.

I was in a car. No, not a car. There were no cars. I was walking. And suddenly, like from nowhere, Isak Samuelson is standing next to me. Isak. I haven't thought of him in... He had been my brother's teacher... But there he is, standing next to me. And it is as if he has been with me the whole time. ...Where did he come from?

So there we were, Isak and myself, and suddenly there was a train. I could smell it as it went by. The metal. Sweat. Salt. I could smell salt. It was so long, this train. And I was trying to add the cars, to see how long this train was. One plus one plus one... It was an infinite number of cars, but I couldn't get beyond one. And I had to get to my mother...!

My mother, olav h'sholem. What a dream.

I'm sorry, I'm a little, how do you say, inside out. These days, anything I remember, I have to tell someone immediately, otherwise it might be gone...forever. So, but, it's just a silly dream. What do you care?

(Shift)

I don't sleep so good. Since when could a person sleep well? How, I ask you? I spit on those who sleep well!

(Spits.)

What time has it?

(Looks to see if he's wearing a watch. He is not. Notices he is wearing a suit.)

I'm wearing a suit.

You see this? I'm wearing a suit. Why am I wearing a suit?

(Looks around. Notices a "book" sitting on a "table" next to him and picks it up.)

Ah, I was just reading. Yes, I remember now. My wife's diary. It's fascinating!

That sounds bad. She's dead, my wife. No, don't make a fuss. It's a long time already. Several months. So maybe it's not so long, but like an eternity.

But so, I'm not really invading her privacy. Well, I am, but someone must bear witness to a life. Someone must be able to say, I know who you are. I know who you were.

Besides... *(trying to remember...)*

Besides...

(Shift)

(Gestures towards the bookcases.)

Why don't I read something else? I have filled up this house with books. Every corner I turn reveals the spine of some memory. Sometimes it's in the words of a phrase, or a character's name, or just a feeling. A smell of twilight because I read a certain book on the porch at sunset.

(Takes out a "book.")

This one, for example. This one gives me...what is the expression? Something... butterflies in the spleen! I read it – or tried to – while Ellie was giving birth to our daughter. In my day I was relegated to the waiting room.

That first paragraph, I read it over and over again. Something about Tupperware...

(Opens the "book" and turns to the first page. Squints to read.)

Mrs. Oedipus Maas and a Tupperware party.

People raved about this book, but I was never able to get interested in it. Well, a novel that starts with plastic storage containers, could you blame a person?

I have kept it for the feeling. That memory. That's the story of this book.

(Smells the book, a deep inhale.)

I can smell my fear. My anticipation. It's a little bit stale now, but still.

Such a beautiful child, you never saw! A full head of hair! She was so sleepy the first time I saw her. I didn't know they could be sleepy when they're born. It makes sense, no? Such a journey. I expected...what? Screams. But she looked directly at me when I came in, and her eyes – my breath almost stopped – she had my mother's eyes. Even down to the sadness. I don't know, had my mother been born with that sadness? Or is that just how I remember her? But there it was, in my daughter's eyes, as if she were carrying on my mother's story without ever being told it. She knew nothing of the world and already she knew tsuris.

And I – I couldn't help myself – I wept. That I should have had a life to give life. That I should be looking into my mother's eyes...

(Smells the book again.)

(Shift)

I wish I could remember why I got into this suit. A good suit you don't put on every day. Maybe if I think backwards I can put it together.

It's the past that I remember clearly now. Things have come into focus, some welcome, others not. And meanwhile, the present gets fuzzier and fuzzier.

What's that joke about fuzzy math?

Maybe it's not a joke.

Because, I remember jokes.

Here's one: There are two groups of people in the world: those who believe that the world can be divided into two groups of people, and those who don't.

(Cracks himself up.)

Hilarious!

My wife used to say to me: Leo, you are buried in numbers. One of these days I'm going to be doing the laundry and I'm going to see

numbers fall out of your socks! Funny and not so funny at the same time. Numbers. They are in my blood.

(Shift)

So, there's a benefit to my condition: anything I've read recently I can read again, since I've already forgotten it.

(Puts "book" away.)

(Shift)

I'm sorry. I should have said something before, but...I can't remember who you are. Don't tell me. Maybe with my glasses. *(Pats pockets, looking for glasses.)* It's silly, telling you all this and I don't even... But if I don't tell someone...if I don't tell someone...

(Shift)

The thing about numbers is that you can never take away from them what they are. A one is a one is a one, and even when it's not, it still is. And you can prove it. There is a truth to numbers. When we are all dead and buried, numbers will still be. They will just be. With or without us. If you understand numbers, then you can understand...all that you might think is unimaginable. Time. Gravity. Black holes.

People.

At least for me, yes people. I'm not suggesting that people are measurable in any way. I'm not meshugeh yet. I don't think. No, for me, people and numbers are one and the same. My daughter, for example, when she was born, was a one. An American one. How can I explain? It has to do with many things. Many different things about her. Her shape, for one, skinny. Even when she was just born. How she got so skinny from the two of us... Like a stick. But also her place in my life, in my heart. She is...primary. Not to say that she outranks her mother. No. Her mother... Ellie is in a class by herself. Ellie... you might think this is cliché... Ellie is an eight.

You don't seem to understand. When I first saw Ellie, I thought: eight! There was no question. A figure eight. So yes, cliché, but isn't that what happens when we are in love?

There's another reason why one for my daughter. The two of us, me and Ellie, added one. Just one additional, but like a whole

population to our little family. A one may just be a one, but when you add it, and add it, and add it, well, that is how we keep our story being told. Shayna was a one.

Later she became an eleven, but that's another story.

And Ellie is an eight.

Was. Eight. A perfect eight.

(Shift)

What are you looking at?

(Looks behind him at the back wall.)

Ah, it's a strange color, no? Ellie chose it. It's called...what was it called? Moss something? The name was wonderful. I want to say Forest Fungus... or Touch of the Toadstool? No. I'll think of it.

Oh, I see what you're looking at. The art! Of course. Why would I think...?

It's by my daughter. She is an artist. I always said, we taught you to *appreciate* art, not to *make* it! But she's a stubborn one. Knows her own mind. Of course, she has talent as well. Not that I need to tell her! Why encourage? But look.

(Gestures towards "painting" on back wall. This prop may be initially indicated and treated in pantomime, or it may be a blank canvas or an empty frame.)

It reminds me of where I grew up. You see, the streets are unpaved. The sidewalks, wooden. How does she know such a place? Even...there is even a bridge in the distance. It's as if she had been there. But, of course, that's impossible. I'm sure it doesn't exist any longer. God knows if that bridge is still standing, or if there's a village that I would recognize. By now maybe the streets would be like ours here: filled with *McDonalds* and *The Gaps* and *Crate and Buckets*.

How could she know that bridge?

Growing up, it was the gateway to the rest of the world. You longed to go over it at the same time that it terrified you. What was on the other side? We used to go, a pack of us children, and stand at our

side of the bridge. Look across. We weren't supposed to go that far, of course, but we were children. Since when do children follow orders?

"Number of People," it's called. That's the title.

Which is funny, because, as you can see, there are no people in the painting! My daughter's sense of humor. It's a little bit...how do you say...on an angle.

It's fuzzy without my glasses. Maybe in different lighting.

(Takes the "painting" off the wall and places it on the floor, leaning up against...something.)

Such a place it was before. A beautiful city. The people, beautiful. Everybody was happy. We were poor, yes, but happy. For I don't know how long we had lived like this. Centuries. Maybe longer. Some dressed nicely. Some a little less nicely. One might have a nice hat, shoes, tie, suit.

It's a funny thing about owning a good suit. At some point you think, I will never own a suit again. No, you don't even think about it. You can't imagine a place, a time, when you'll wear a suit again. When you're worried about what is there to eat, where is my brother, you don't think so much about a suit.

And then some beshert – luck – reaches down and pulls you somehow to another land. Another life. And still, you can't think past the holes in your shoes. So you make do. You survive.

You survive!

And the next thing you know, you turn around and it's your daughter's graduation day. And there you are in a fine suit.

We almost didn't go, it was so hot. But Shayna said, please, this is important to me. I said, it's so important for us to watch you, among hundreds, walk across a stage set out in the hot sun to get a piece of paper? That's meaningful?!

She cried. I made her cry. Ellie said, shame on you.

No, she didn't say it, but I could tell she thought it. It was in her eyes. So we went. And we sat. And we perspired... And I wept. I didn't know I would be so moved, but it was my daughter...

(Checks the label on his suit. Squints to look at it closely.)

Made in Mexico. Who would have thought?

And after, I thought, when will I ever need such a suit again? For so long there has been no reason. No reason. And you hang it in the back of your closet. But then comes your daughter's wedding, and you think, I'll wear my good suit! And your retirement party. And you're feeling so proud of yourself because you're really getting good use out of this fine suit. What a life! What a lucky man am I!

And then, lucky man you are, you get to wear it to your wife's funeral.

Because you spit in God's eye.

Kanahari puh, puh, puh.

You forgot. You forgot.

This suit carries the salt of sweat and tears both.

All those times it wasn't you. You weren't the one picked. You escaped because you stood next to or in the back of... It just happened that way. You didn't do it purposely! And every time, thanks God... So you forgot: he giveth and he taketh away...if you believe such things. And it wasn't you. You stood next to her your whole life, and it wasn't you.

That's why numbers.

How hard is it to figure? If you stay to the back, the side, they take from the front. It just happened that way. And you can wait it out. The numbers say so. The numbers say so!

I don't brag about surviving. It's nothing to brag about. Do we brag because we make it home alive at the end of each day? It's luck. Such things do not make us heroes. So I should brag about avoiding a bullet? A fire? A gas chamber? I should get a medal? Such chazzari.

The longer it is, the more I miss her. They say time heals everything. Not this. You just learn to live with it. Like a big black hole, that's always there. And it's...it's something that you never... Never before...

Like never before in this whole cockamamie life you've lived!

(Shift)

I always come back to numbers. Every event has a certain probability of occurring. Like...who is chosen. Who will be chosen? It's an unknown probability. X . Let's say, X equals being chosen. You see, now we can look backwards and know the probability of, say, whether you might live, which was about, well, where I was, 9 percent; the probability that you might die was, conversely, 91 percent; that you might escape, half of a percent, or get Typhus, 31 percent, or find your brother, less than 1 percent. That's being generous.

Though, we had no way of knowing that then.

The X is how many times the event occurs in each sample. What you're looking for is the mean of X . The more samples you take, the closer that mean comes to the true probability, which we call a μ .

Like a kitty cat, yes. Mew. Mew.

(Shift)

What was I talking about?

I remember that I am forgetting. Such a thing to remember.

Well, you know that joke. Old statisticians never die, they just lose some of their functions.

(Cracks up.)

Well, actually it's supposed to be mathematicians, but I change it.

(Shift)

You know, I can't remember if we've met before. If so, perhaps it was a very long time ago. Another lifetime...

Maybe this is crazy, but, I'm going to say something... Well... I haven't said this for a long time...

(Pause. Does he want the response?)

(Quietly at first.) Amacha.

(More fraught.) Amacha.

(Almost desperate.) Amacha!

(Pause. Registers that there is no reaction.)

Well, the good news is I don't know you from there. Don't worry about what it means. A little private shibboleth from a long ago life.

Do you know what a shibboleth is? It's in the bible, not that I expect you to know... Two tribes... What were they called? For the life of me, I can't remember the names. I tell you, I know this story like the palm of my hand, but I can't think... So be it. Two tribes. Which one good, which one bad? Yes, well, you tell me. One conquered the other. Over what? Who knows. Who cares.

You know, that reminds me of another joke. One of my favorites. There are three types of people in the world: those who can count, those who can't, and those who...no, it's... Wait, those who... What was the joke?

Something about kitty cats?

No, not cats. Tribes! Of course, tribes!

So the one tribe, the conquering tribe, sets up a...how do you say it? A blockade! A blockade to prevent the losing tribe from running away. No, they shouldn't get away; They should be killed! So, but they got all mixed up. Who can tell who is from what tribe? Well, one tribe pronounces certain words with a "sh" sound, while the other tribe, the losing one, pronounces those words with an "s" sound.

Shibboleth.

It means nothing. A piece of grain, if I remember correctly. But the saying of it... The saying of it was life or death. If they said "sibboleth," they were killed. 42,000. 42,000 killed because they spoke differently.

Since time began...

(Shift)

Where is my daughter? I have been waiting for my daughter for... I don't know how long. Always it's the traffic or a phone call or...who knows what? She's an artist, so sometimes she gets carried away with her paintbrush. But I tell her, paint on your own time! Not on mine! I have already given away enough of my time.

My daughter, the meshuggeneh vegetarian. Doesn't like to eat animals. Says she can't sleep sometimes because of all the animals being killed. She says: I will not be a bystander!

I tell her: who sleeps well? I spit on those who sleep well!

(Spits.)

She carries the weight of the world on her...you know...on her...

Spine.

There is a German word for that. Carrying the weight of the world's problems. Maybe I'll think of it...

I used to say I would never have a child. Who could bring a child into this world? I said to Ellie when we got married: you ought to really think twice about marrying a Jew. She said: life needs a little Jewish seasoning to taste good.

My perfect eight.

This diary of hers I was just reading, from the year 1963. So long ago. Like yesterday. We were living in Sweden. A strange year. Dark days in many ways. Our downstairs neighbors in the flat we were renting told us when President...what's his name...was shot. So young. You know who. What was his...? It took longer for news to travel in those times. By then the sun had set, and it felt like the sun had set on the entire world. I thought... I thought our days were numbered. November in Sweden, already it feels like the world is ending.

Ellie wrote... Let me find it.

(Thumbs through "journal". Squints.)

Where are my glasses! Maybe they fell into the chair. I must have fallen asleep with them on...

(Searches in the cushions of the chair. Drops to his knees to feel around under the chair and around the “table.” As he’s looking:)

This is ridiculous! They must be here someplace! I was in this chair when I woke up, no? Yes! I remember that! And I had been reading... God knows I wouldn’t have been reading without my glasses.

(Pats his pockets, the top of his head.)

Never mind. Let me see if I can find it.

(Squints. Scans the pages.)

Here it is! *(Reads:)* “The dawn came so late today. Our flat is cold. The water is cold. And Leo is lost in his statistics.”

Who knew? I didn’t know. My own wife. I was lost in numbers and she was cold.

(Pause.)

It’s not just the numbers! I speak of numbers, yes. And the numbers, they make sense of the senseless. But, how can I explain? Every number means much more than a number. Every number is a face, a voice, a life. Not just a life, but a connection to an infinite number of lives. Every statistic is an address lived at, a chair sat in. You. Do you think of yourself as a statistic? Of course not! And there is proof that you are more. There are photographs and diaries. Books you’ve read. Someone must bear witness! Someone must tell the story.

A whole life condensed into a number. How do you not get lost in that?

Sweden for me was... How can I say it? A nova – is that what it’s called? Yes, nova, as the sun disappeared earlier each day. I was there doing research on the Jewish population in Scandinavia. Sweden took 900 Norwegian Jews, and 8,000 from Denmark. When the rest of the world was closing their doors, turning us away, Sweden took us in. Not that she didn’t take in some gold too. But so be it.

I ran into an old...teacher there. He had been a teacher. Isak Samuelson. I am remembering, he was in my dream! I had a

strange dream last night. It's...it's not so clear now. There were trains and...salt. Isak was there with my mother. No, my mother wasn't there. I can't quite remember now. It's fuzzy.

Isak had taught history. Not to me – I had been too young for his class – but to my brother Morris. Olav h'sholem. It was a simcha, meeting him in Sweden. A celebration. Happy and sad, both. Happy and sad.

(Shift)

It's all numbers. You can think, I am just one. But you are one, and you are one, and you are one. And I'll tell you this, the one you are is the only one you are. Once that one is subtracted, you are zero. And there is nothing to be gotten from nothing.

But one plus one... well, that's the way we get to infinity. Slowly, slowly. But that's how we get there.

(Shift)

I'm thirsty. I could use a drink.

(Waits, as if someone will get him one.)

I'm trying to remember... This is silly...

How is it one goes about getting a drink?

No, forget it! Who needs a drink! I'll wait until my daughter gets here. She should be here any minute.

(Shift)

We used to drink rainwater, when we could. We'd put cups and bowls, anything, outside. You'd have to hide it, not only from the guards, but from each other. Sometimes only mere drops. But enough to almost quench one's thirst. Or if you were feeling decadent, you might even splash it on your face. A mikvah, we used to joke. Such a joke. Somehow it was funny then. Funny without laughing.

A mikvah. Do you know what that is? A cleansing. I'm sorry, if I could remember where I knew you from... A mikvah is – the short

version – a cleansing before a spiritual journey. So, that still doesn't make it funny, does it? Somehow it was funny then...

Fresh water. Not that we prayed for rain. But at least it brought us that gift.

No rainbows. Not there. Nothing could get through the darkness. The smoke. Shayna once said to me, "a rainbow is God smiling." She was so young. A rainbow doesn't go the right direction, I told her. She got so sad. But am I wrong? It arcs down. It's a multi-colored frown. God's frown!

But God didn't even frown there.

God. Feh!

Am I wrong, or does it seem like God is making a comeback? Suddenly everyone is talking about God and believing in God and proclaiming themselves a sergeant in God's army. Such arrogance. As if anyone could know God. As if, if you spoke to God, or he spoke to you, you wouldn't spend the rest of your days quaking in your socks!

God. Feh!

If you think God's got some plans you know about...oh, listen. I can hear him laughing.

(Pause.)

Funny, there was an argument Ellie and I had. And I said that exact thing: God. Feh! When was that? What were we talking about?

(It suddenly dawns on him.)

Gottenyu.

After Shayna was born, Ellie became depressed. Baby Blues, they call it. She cried. Not just cried. Sobbed. From the...how is it said? From the bowels. She talked of black holes. Desolation. She said she couldn't see the sun. And I... I told her she couldn't know what desolation was! I told her she had a child to take care of! There was no time to waste crying. Who has that time? Life is going by while you sit in your tears!

And finally, one day...one Sunday, she handed me the baby and left. Shayna was wailing. All day, crying. I didn't know what to do with her. I had no idea... So I just held her as close as I could. I kept saying to her, "I will never let you out of my arms. Out of my eyes."

What more can you offer a child?

I held her so close. I could feel her warm little body against my chest, screaming. Screaming with life. I held onto her all day.

Ellie came home. I didn't even ask where she had been. I am ashamed to say...I didn't want to know.

And that week, the meals started coming in. A new couple every night dropping by a casserole, a lasagna. Who are these people, I asked. I demanded! That's when she said she had been to church. They were from church.

I was... I was...knocked down. Is that what I mean to say? Church! It made me look like a fool! Like I wasn't taking care of her.

I needed help, she said.

You couldn't get help from someone else? I asked. From our friends?

She said, academics don't bring dinner over.

We argued. She was right, but we argued. Fought. We, who never raised our voices to each other.

Why the church? Why not somewhere else?

Because these are good people, she said.

There are good people in other places too, I told her.

She said, it's different when they believe in God.

God! Feh!! That's what I said. Feh!!

(Pause.)

I am sorry for what I said. How I said it. But I still don't understand, why does it have to do with God?

(Shift)

I'm very thirsty.

(Shift)

Forgive me, I've been confiding in you and... I must tell you, I can't remember who you are. How do I know you?

It would be helpful if I could find my glasses. Then you could see me clearly.

I mean, I could see you clearly. Is that what I said? You'll excuse me, I'm feeling a little bit...how do you say...upside down.

(Pause.)

Glasses. Of course. How silly of me. If I had a glass, I could fill it with water, no?

Now, where do you think we keep the glasses?

(Looks around.)

All I see are books. Spines staring at me from every direction.

(Walks around the room opening "drawers," looking under "objects" as he unconsciously tries to sing a lullaby (Oyfn Pripetshik), becoming increasingly agitated and confused. As he continues singing, he goes to the bookshelves and starts pulling "books" down, letting them drop to the floor and throwing them behind him. As he pantomimes this, actual books fall, one by one, growing in speed, from above, creating piles that grow around him until he sinks to his knees, breathless, picking up the actual books and letting them tumble out of his hands.)

(Singing:) Oyfn pripetshik brent a fayeri...

Oyfn pripetshik...

How does that go?

Un der rebbe...

Dem alefbeyz...

That's not right!

Oyfn pripetshik brent a fayeri...

Zet zhe, kinderlech...

Zet zhe, kinderlech...

Oyfn pripetshik brent a...

What is that?!

Komets alef o...

Un der rebbe...

(Finally, on his knees:)

Where are the glasses?!

Where are the glasses?!

Ellie!! Where are the glasses?!

(Shift, but maintaining the emotion:)

They burned these. Piles and piles of them. I can smell the fresh sheets, not even cut yet. That smell. You can't get a smell like that out of a book today. The new ones were still moist, hard to burn. And they made us build the fires. And they made us throw the books in. Our grandparents' books. Schoolbooks. Diaries. Lives that had been written. Lost. Burned. And the books screamed. Yes, you could hear them. They cracked and popped and shriveled. And screamed. They were their own tinder.

And later, they made us do it with the bodies.

(Pause.)

I am so thirsty.

(Pause.)

Ellie didn't know. She never knew. How could I say such things to her? She didn't know what I knew. What I had seen.

What I had done...

Such things are...unspeakable.

So instead, I count. I count the others. From the wars, the despots. In places we never would have thought... Countries where they're so short, they looked like children. Dead children. Well, many of them were. Places known as the cradle of civilization, I saw where it had crumbled. Bodies of dark-skinned, light-skinned, orange, yellow, white as alabaster, dark as ebony. Dots on their foreheads, sheets wrapped in every which way, suits... Like the suit I am wearing now.

I have seen women with their hands tied behind their backs, shot, stabbed, starved. Raped, not just by men, but by machetes, guns, pieces of wood. Dead women with babies still at the breast. Babies starved. Babies with swords through them, bullets, axes. Babies that had been thrown onto fires, still alive.

I have seen the children who were left: the witnesses. Their eyes as dead as their brothers' and sisters' bodies.

I count the bodies, living and dead, because that is what I know how to do! That is what I learned!

In the end, we are all just statistics.

(Pause.)

You know, old statisticians never die, they just become nonsignificant.

(Pause.)

When I say, "count bodies," it's a bit misleading. Of course, I do that. Did that. But bodies disappear. They are disappeared. And so one of the ways you count is through memory. The dead are carried around by the living. We are the... audience. Is that the right word? The witnesses. We can count the body even if we lose the body, but we cannot count the body if we lose the story: if we lose the living. If we lose the living, we lose the dead. And if we lose the dead... If we lose the dead, then we start the killing all over again. A different place, a different reason, but the same thing.

Each time they choose, your chances for living decrease. But, I chose where I stood, and by doing so, I survived! If you place yourself correctly, you can survive. Because to be chosen is to die. I was the mean! Do you understand? I was marked by the X! I was the solution – the Final Solution – and the answer was my death. It's in the numbers. They always take from the front. If you stay to the back, to the side... Life! Death! It's all in the numbers!

(Shift)

What was I looking for?

Such a mess.

(Picks up a book. Lets it fall.)

(Shift)

Ten years ago I was in...what was it called?

They are, all of them, different, and yet the same.

Before I left, Ellie kept saying that she couldn't keep it straight, the difference between the ones who had done the killing and the ones who had been killed. She asked me, which ones are the bad guys? She asked me over and over again who the bad guys were. I said finally, all of us! We are all the bad guys!

Ellie told me, Leo, your English is so bad. You mean *they*. You mean *they* are all bad.

(Pause.)

We spent weeks driving. Driving and counting. There were still bodies in the road. In the fields. Skeletons with flesh still attached. Not that I hadn't seen such things before. I myself was a skeleton with flesh on it at one point.

We came to a church where there had been a massacre. There were bodies everywhere. Piles of bones on top of bones. Hair. Clothes. Rats. And the flies were...roaring. Roaring! They were so loud. It was as if a swarm of them had become a separate being, roaring. The smell was overwhelming. A church. They had massacred hundreds of people in a church.

We wore scented rags over our mouth and noses so that we could stand to be there. Still, the smell was there. I have known that smell. But this was...

There were hundreds of bodies. In a church.

So we counted.

When we were through, we drove to a little aid station up the road. They were healing amputated limbs and broken skin. There was a girl there – hardly a girl. On the verge of being a woman. If she'd had a body, you might be able to know such a thing. But she was...like the others, a skeleton. Dark, dark flesh. Her arms were the thickness almost of the pencils we were using.

Negative one. She was a negative one, so that she was even less than a zero.

The aid workers asked us if we had been to the church. When we said yes, they told us this young girl had been living there. She had just come from there.

Just? I asked. Those bodies have been decomposing for weeks. Months!

Yes, she has been living with the bodies, they told me. With her dead parents and sisters and brothers.

I went to sit with her. I wanted to...to ask her...about her parents. Her story. That was my job. But also...

I saw that the fingers on one hand were gone. The skin had closed around the stumps in an infected knot. She had her head turned, so that I couldn't see her eyes. And instead what I saw was a gash, like an axe had divided her skull towards the back. This also had healed over in a zigzag bundle of skin.

Finally, she turned and looked at me. And those eyes. What I saw in those eyes... What I saw in those eyes is how much those eyes had seen. I knew those eyes. Like they were my own...

The corners of her mouth were pulled back into a smile. How could she be smiling? It's...what's the word...incongruous! But I knew that smile. It is a smile because the face cannot do anything else.

Because the face cannot remind the brain what it knows. Because the brain cannot remind the heart that it has been broken.

So we smile.

And the eyes were so wide with all they had seen that the pupils were surrounded by white on every side. Dark eyes, surrounded by white, surrounded by black skin.

She had been in a place you cannot begin to imagine. But I...I have been there. And I have traveled back there many times.

Yes, my English is bad. But I meant what I said: we are all the bad guys...

If someone could explain to me the why. Even the how. Not just how it happened. I know the machinations backwards and frontwards. But how a whole country, a whole world of human beings made it happen. Continues to make it happen. Continues now, today! Even knowing. Even with the history tattooed into our skin...

Murder is at man's hands, not God's! There is no God in it! There is no God in it!!

(Pause)

What was I looking for?

You'll have to excuse me. I'm losing my mind.

I mean to say – I am losing my memory. Things I have just done or said go away. It is as if I have too much information already, and I cannot hold on to anymore.

Forgive me, I seem to have forgotten who you are. I can't... No, don't tell me. This is embarrassing. Here I am, telling you... I can't seem to help it. It keeps pouring out of me. I am...overflowing.

(Hears a "knock." This is only audible to him, not to the audience.)

Someone's at the door.

It must be my daughter. I've been waiting for her. My meshuggeneh daughter is always late. I tell her, you can waste your time, but not

mine! I have already given away enough of my time! I spit on those who...!

(A confused moment. Goes to "door" and opens it. No one is there.)

Hello?

Hello?!

I heard somebody knocking...

(Looks down. There is a bucket filled with water at his feet. This is a real bucket with real water.)

What is this?

(Carries it inside to set it just to the side of the painting. Drops to his knees, partly from exhaustion, partly from excitement. Breathes heavily. Inhales the smell of the water.)

Rain water.

(Inhales again.)

What is this?

(Tests the water with a finger. Then, tentatively, with a hand. Then with both hands, messily, violently, he scoops up water to his lips and drinks. And drinks. When he's had his fill, he scoops water onto his face. There should be both joy and sadness in these actions. Lets the water drip from his face onto his suit. Is he crying as well? Notices that he has splashed water onto the painting.)

I've spilled on the painting...

(Looks closely at the painting where it is dripping.)

There's something underneath. I never noticed. There's something written underneath.

It looks like numbers.

(Reads from right to left, slowly:)

Zero...zero...zero...zero...zero...zero...

Six.

Six million.

(Long pause. This is not a shift.)

When the Americans came, they were like a mirage. We had, most of us, given up hope. Survival was... Was it worth it? And then, just when it felt like you couldn't go on one more moment, there they were. Like angels. And you could see yourself in their eyes. In horror, they looked at us. Horror!

They gave us bread. So much bread. And there was a woman... I am remembering just now, a woman shouting, nit shnel! Not fast! Don't eat so fast! Slowly! Pamelekh! Slowly! One man who had slept next to me died. Right in front of us. From eating too much. It's not funny. But it's funny.

But I ate just a little bit, slowly. It was ambrosia, the way it tasted in my mouth. I chewed and chewed and chewed so I wouldn't be tempted to eat too fast. I can remember what it felt like to chew that bread.

It was a miracle. Suddenly, from one life to another in a matter of moments.

It was then I saw Isak. How we could have been living in the same place...for so long... Perhaps we didn't recognize. He was...unrecognizable.

Or perhaps we just never looked up to meet one another's eyes.

But there he was, almost on the top of me. I didn't know him well before. But well enough. He had been my brother's teacher. My brother, Morris. Olav h'sholem. And he had been so distinguished. With a beard, and a round belly. And here he was with his belly button practically touching his spine. He had been a six. A big, fat six. Now he was a negative one. Like I was too. We just stood there, for I don't know how long, staring at each other. Smiling. We couldn't stop smiling, but I don't know it was happiness we were feeling. Something, not happiness. And then he took my hand and held it to his face. He rubbed his cheek with my hand, like a baby.

We sobbed. Without tears, smiling, we sobbed. Who had tears left?

A soldier came over. A Jewish soldier. An American Jew. He spoke Yiddish like it was second nature. No, not second nature. Second hand? Is that what I mean to say? Like it had been learned. He said, Ikh vil dir geben epes. I want to give you something. Everything was happening very fast. Come with me, he said. So we followed, because we were good at following. He led us away from the others, toward the road. Vilt ir tzurikshlugn?, he asked. We didn't know what he meant. It translates, do you want to hit back.

Revenge. He meant revenge. He handed us each a gun. They are living all around you, he said. Close enough to help. Some of them worked here. They are well-fed, they and their families. Do you want retaliation?! Vilt ir tzurikshlug hobn?!

I could feel the bread in my belly, heavy and burning. And my eyes burned from the dryness of crying with no tears. And my feet burned from holding up my body. And my mind burned like a swarm of flies was inside.

And so we went. Without consulting one another. We went. With blindness over our eyes. And our hearts. And he was right. So close you could spit on them were houses. How they could have lived. How they could have slept...!

(Pause.)

Another joke. How many Jews can you fit into a Volkswagon?

100! Two in the front seat, two in the back, and 96 in the ashtray!

Americans don't like that joke so much. I learned it from Israelis. The Israelis have a different sense of...

(Pause.)

What was I saying?

Isak. And the gun. Yes, we had guns.

We went into the first house. I don't know how we even made it so far. It wasn't the bread fueling us! We hadn't spoken. Not one word. I was breathing so hard. We went into this house.

It was a family there. A warm house. Two small children, a boy and a girl. The woman was cooking. Normally. As if it were normal to be

home with your family, cooking. She screamed. I pointed my gun right at her. Sha shtil! I yelled. Be quiet! It all happened very fast. The children ran in. The little girl, crying, holding to her mother. But the boy was slightly older. He came right up to me, even while I held this gun. Jews, he said. And he spit in my face.

Juden.

A child!! He was a child. And I...I too was a child. A boy still. Just barely.

I had never held a gun in my life. I grabbed this boy and pushed him against the wall, hard. I pushed him hard, holding the gun to his throat. The woman screamed. I screamed. Sha shtil! Sha shtil! This boy, I think he weighed more than I did, but I felt so strong. I looked in his eyes. Momzer, I said. You bastard! I pressed the gun into his throat and I could hear him choking. The gun was choking him. And in that moment I felt that this boy, this one boy, was all of them. All of the men who had driven the trains, and the children who had watched, and the women who went on cooking while we... while we... while we...!

I pressed the gun to his throat!

From, it seemed like far away, I heard Isak screaming. Leo! I could barely even recognize it as my name. Leo! This is not who you are! This is not who you are! THIS IS NOT WHO YOU ARE!

(Pause. Amazed. Breathless.)

Isak saved my life. My life. He saved my life.

We never spoke of it. I have never spoken of it to anyone.

And then, from that day, I didn't see him again until we were in Sweden.

(Pause.)

It was outside of a café. I had just had a warm meal and a beer. How nice to have a beer with lunch. Everyone should have a beer with lunch. Why is it only in Europe? Such a civilized place...

I came outside and the weather was brisk. Beautiful. Sunny but chilly, so that you felt warm and cool at the same time. The sun was

so bright, in fact, it's why I didn't recognize him at first. I didn't see his face.

What I saw was his arm.

Why he was wearing short sleeves in such weather, I don't know.

Why he was wearing short sleeves at all...!

So what I saw were the numbers. Maybe it was the beer, or the sun, but all I saw were the numbers. And so I didn't know who he was. It had been many years, of course. I didn't know that I knew him. I just... I went up to him, and before I knew it was him I said...

Amacha.

Amacha.

Amacha!

And he said, Leo, you don't need code words with me. You don't need code words now. And I saw that it was Isak. I said, yes, I know who you are. Of course. I know who you are. I know who you are.

Isak. He closed the garage door and turned on his car... Isak. Olav h'sholem.

(Pause.)

Sweden was so beautiful. Even with the few hours of daylight. The light, when it was there, like a nova...how can I explain how I felt? Life!

(He sits.)

You'll excuse me. I'm very tired suddenly. This is a bit rude, I'm sorry. I'll just close my eyes until my wife gets here. She's coming to pick me up. My figure eight. She's not usually so late, but...

The thing about a figure eight is, when you turn it on its side, it becomes infinity...

So, the numbers have a life of their own. My daughter, as she grew older, became more than a one. She became an eleven. I realized this as I started to see more of me in her. I, of course, am a one.

Just like you would be to yourself. You are a one, and you are a one, and you are a one. (*Looking at one audience member in particular:*) Of course, to me, you are a four. Don't ask why, just accept your fate.

Shayna. I saw that Shayna was not just herself, but that she was me. Is me. Is my mother. Is Ellie. Shayna became a one and a one and yet, indivisible by others, as an eleven is. So that even as her ancestors fell away, she would stand to tell our stories. We must all have a witness to tell the story of our numbers. We must all have people to bear witness to our story...

So I don't worry about her...

Oyfn pripetshik brent a fayeri, Un in...

Oyfn pripetshik brent a fayeri...

I can't remember...

Un der rebbe lernt kleyne kinderlech...

Dem alefbeyz...

Zogt zhe noch a mol...

*(He is about to fall asleep, when suddenly, he snaps awake.
Looks hard at the audience.)*

I know who you are.

Of course. Yes.

I know who you are. You... Me...

We are all the bad guys.

We are all the bad guys.

END OF PLAY