

THE FLAME ALPHABET

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ALSO BY BEN MARCUS

The Age of Wire and String

Notable American Women

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To my family—Heidi, Delia, and Solomon

1

We left on a school day, so Esther wouldn't see us. In my personal bag, packed when my wife, Claire, had finally collapsed in sleep against the double-bolted bedroom door as it was getting light out, I stashed field glasses, sound abatement fabrics, and enough rolled foam to conceal two adults. On top of these I crammed a raw stash of anti-comprehension pills, a child's radio retrofitted as a toxicity screen, an unopened bit of gear called a Dräger Aerotest breathing kit, and my symptom charts.

This was the obvious equipment, medical gear I could use on the fly, from the car, at night. That is, if I even got the chance.

I did not bring LeBov's needle. I had tried the needle and the needle did not work.

My secondary supplies consisted of medical salts and a portable burner, a copper powder for phonic salting, plus some rubber bulbs and a bootful of felt. Eye masks and earplugs and the throat box that was functioning as the white noisery, to spew a barrier of hissing sound over me.

Tucked into the outside pouch, for quick access, I placed a personal noise dosimeter, hacked to measure children's speech. I wanted to be able to hear them coming.

In my pocket I carried the facial calipers, even if by now finer measurements weren't required. You could perform the diagnostic just by looking.

Murphy scoffed at this gear, called it salt on the wound. He called

it things worse than that, said I was fooling with toys. Medicine, said Murphy, was a vain decoration inside of your body. Invisible war paint, ritual and superstition, typical Jewish smallwork.

Murphy had other plans. Murphy was arming from LeBov's list and LeBov's orders came straight from Rochester, where reports on the speech fever had first collected and the cautions were so total now, it was a wonder people weren't burying themselves alive.

Of course I have no evidence that they were not.

Finally in foil shielding I packed the volatile artifacts themselves: some samples of our daughter Esther's speech, recorded and written. A language archive of the girl. Paper and tapes, a broad syllabus of topics, a spectrum of moods. Our viral girl, fourteen years old, singing, laughing, yelling, whispering, arguing, speaking sotto voce, making up words. Reciting letters, numbers, crying out in pain. Even some foreign language statements, which I had instructed Esther to recite phonetically.

These I sealed in the woolen dossier because I could not look at the writing anymore without feeling what I could only call the crushing.

Pain is too soft a word for the reaction. *Crushing* was more accurate, an intolerable squeezing in the chest and the hips, though I didn't have measurements to support the claim. The Marshall Symptom appliance, bolted to the sidewalk outside the medical center on Fifth Street and visited by a procession of gray-faced neighbors, was meant to detect just how slushed our insides were from too much speech, how blighted we'd become from the language toxin. But the needle was pegging on every snuffle and pain, the appliance red-lighting nearly everyone it tested as overdosed, scorched, past the point of help.

So far the crushing was a personal observation, as with most of the symptoms we'd heard about, and as such it might as well be dismissed.

This bag of gear, as heavy as a small child, would go into the car last.

Claire and I weren't the only parents to ditch our houses and, in some cases, *other items of value*. The command went out in early December, issued in a final radio report before the stations went mute, and everyone was leaving. But there was altogether no eye contact from the other men and women likewise packing their cars. The conferring, the hand-wringing, the coolly delivered expertise some of us had to endure

from the defensive, uninformed types—that had come and gone, leaving only stupefaction in its place. A disbelief walled off by illness. The know-it-alls are always the last to know. Everyone's a diagnostician, and everyone's wrong.

In cities, in towns, in the rural deposits, along the ledge that dropped off into outer Rochester, and in the middle field beyond the swale that some still called the Monastery, quarantines of children clustered up, overtaking neighborhoods, fields, forests, any venue that could be roughly bound by fencing. Loudspeakers lashed to trees, broadcasting the vocal repellent. Fairy tales blasting into the woods, convulsing any adult who came near. Loved ones telephoned each other to exchange dead air, a language of sighs, because to do any more, to build any speech into that heavy breathing, would bring them to their knees.

Which is where some of us belonged.

Today our leaving was blessed by a sheer wall of privacy. The body language on our street could have been studied for its gesture-perfect evasions. Just weeks before, Rabbi Burke, speaking by cable to our Jewish hut, called it defended semaphore, the gestures of a body craving disappearance. How many ways can you say *Stay the fuck away from me* without speaking? It was a well-crafted public solitude. We were all artfully alone out there, a condition we had better get used to.

After we were sure Esther was gone, I helped Claire downstairs and tried to get her to eat. I pushed some eggs at her, even though I knew that soon I'd be scraping those eggs into the trash. I gave her the sippy cup of juice and forced her hand around a piece of bread. She did not fight my attentions. I pulled her over to the sink and cleaned off what I could. A yolk stain at the corner of her mouth resisted my rough scrubbing, until I realized it was no stain, but jaundice blooming under her skin. Later I could examine her with the lamp, but now it was time to get her out to the car.

Claire's sole task, given her condition, was to sit in the passenger seat and keep watch. Any sign of Esther walking up the street, a girl with an overstuffed book bag, or so it would seem, and we'd be gone.

It's not that Esther would be allowed near us. The foam-clad officials, barricaded from what the children sprayed, had taken care of that. It was that we chose not to see our daughter captured as we drove away. We wished to avoid such a sight becoming our last image of Esther. Trapped in a net, twitching from a jolt they fired at her. If I policed

Claire on this task, holding her to my small request, I would be viewed as endorsing and even relishing what we were doing. I'd like to call that a small price to pay, but it wasn't. It was a steep, nasty price. Blame no longer hovered over this whole enterprise. It had landed badly, breaking into pieces inside me, and I was making it welcome.

Even before the quarantine was announced, we knew we had to leave. We talked it through as much as Claire could endure, and she had agreed, or, at least, she had assented silently, before wandering back to her soundproofed room, that our exit would be undertaken without the *complication* of Esther's presence. We would not so much as let ourselves see her.

She hated how I verbally rehearsed everything.

I hated it, too.

Once just days before we left, when she was eating candy with a corpse-like lethargy, her hand a cold, blue paw tucking sweets beneath her hospital mask, I showed Claire the timeline I thought we should follow and she held the paper away as if it were an old diaper, heaving an ugly laugh.

Claire had just accommodated a long needle in her hip and she remained perfectly quiet, the stoic patient submitting to her treatment. Now she was rewarding herself with a bowl of candy. My timing was not fine.

"You actually wrote this down," she finally said, her voice hollowed out through the mask.

A statement and not a question. Some essential marital weaponry from the arsenal of not giving an inch. Verbalize someone's actions back to them. Menace them with language, the language mirror. Death by feedback.

"It's a suggestion," I said, in the bedside voice I'd adopted as her caretaker.

Of course it wasn't a suggestion. It was the plan and it was what we had to do. Otherwise there'd be chalk marks around us in days. We had tripped our Esther threshold weeks ago, and our medicine—the comprehension blockers, the agents of estrangement, the treated smoke that left a sick chill to our faces—was only making us worse. There was nowhere safe to send Esther, so it was we who had to depart. The children would remain.

How the children would conduct themselves now that they were the only ones not sickened by speech, that was their business.

If you were smart, if you wanted to buy yourself a few more days, you wouldn't speak at all. Perhaps you already couldn't. The symptoms swallowed some people faster, circled others more slowly, allowing false strength to set in. But for most of us the face was hardening. The lips were pulling back. Inside the mouth was turning tough, numb, and the tongue was docking. Denial had lost its blissful appeal as Claire turned into a paper-skinned creature, sloughing each time she disrobed, too tired to cough. I could live without all the pretense we poured into discussions where the issue had already been decided, where the issue left us no choice. So much ceremony around caring what the other person thought. We'd rub our faces in etiquette, obsess over manners, and fail to notice that we were on the floor and the light was gone and it was no longer possible to breathe.

Claire gave the timeline back to me and turned away.

"Unbelievable," she whispered. "I hope you're enjoying yourself."

"Oh, I am, Claire," I said. "The time of my life."

2

The day my wife and I drove away, the electric should have failed. The phone should have died. The water should have thickened in our pipes.

When the Esther toxicity was in high flower, when it was no longer viable to endure proximity to our daughter, given the retching, the speech fever, the yellow tide beneath my wife's skin, to say nothing of the bruising around my mouth, that day should have been darker, altogether blackened by fire.

That day should have been visibly stained at the deepest levels of air, broken open, sucking people into oblivion. The neighborhood should have been vacuum-sealed, with people reduced to crawling figures, wheezing on their hands and knees, expiring in heaps.

A seizure of cold brown smoke should have spilled over the house.

What are the operative motifs from mythology when parents take leave of a child? Is there not some standard departure imagery offered by the fables?

The day we finally left, birds should have frozen midflight in the winter air as they cruised the neighborhood. Birds locked up with ice, their wings too heavy to hold them aloft. Birds fallen to the ground and piled at our feet, eyes staring up at the sky.

In the street, cars should have quit and rolled to a stop and the road should have buckled, with gases leaking forth, with water foaming out, with perhaps an unclothed man clawing his way from under the asphalt to stalk the neighborhood.

The yard where we played and sometimes picnicked, where Esther and I once staged father-daughter pretend fights, with fake angry faces, to confuse the passing motorists—*Is that a man fistfighting his young daughter?*—or where we argued in earnest, with calm faces that belied our true feelings, Esther asserting, no doubt correctly, that there was something I didn't *understand*—this yard might have functioned as a massive sinkhole. The yard, a throbbing pit in its center, should have exerted a steady pull on anyone in range.

From above, through the brown smoke, you should have seen people and dogs and the smaller trees getting dragged into the collapsing grass.

The day we left there should have been mourners in the street, a parade of weeping parents walking from their homes. Or not weeping. Past that. Devoid of all signs of feeling in the face. Just walking with calm expressions because their faces had finally failed to signal what they felt.

There should have been music pouring from a loudspeaker on the roof of an emergency vehicle. Or perhaps no music, no sound whatsoever. Instead, an emergency vehicle broadcasting a heavy coating of white noise so that even the leaves rustled silently. A plague of deafness, as if an unseen bunting smothered everything, drinking noise, so we could hear nothing.

Making mimes out of all of us. So that we couldn't hear ourselves breathe. So that our shared language would have been suddenly snuffed out.

What a fine bit of foreshadowing that all would have been.

But our neighborhood was failing to foreshadow.

What is it called when features of the landscape mirror the condition of the poor fucks who live in it?

Whatever it is, it was not in effect.

This was, instead, a plain day in the neighborhood, save for the shielded officials of the quarantine, lurking under trees until an enforcement was needed.

If you took the Sedgling exit off 38 and hugged the access road until the Beth Elohim Synagogue reared up, and from there you veered right, keeping the highway at your back, you would pass the ring of bread and coffee shops, and the town square with its deafening fountain, before entering our not-so-gated community of houses just new enough to be nothing special at all.

Perhaps the first thing you'd see that was curious as you circled up Montrier Hill, in the shadow of the electrical tower, which on a clear day dropped a net of darkness over the houses, yards, and roads, was a clottage of ungaraged cars, skewered hastily against curbs, up and down the street with their trunks and doors open, bags spilling out, and men and women who, if you examined them closely, looked more medically defeated than frantic.

And you would have seen, no matter how hard you looked, even if you checked the houses from closet to attic to cellar, precisely no children, least of all those blasting language from their not-so-innocent faces.

Adults only. Cars, suitcases, tears.

A masking silence probably would have been noticed. The neighborhood language-free.

There'd be coatracks flashing across lawns, strung up with intravenous pouches fashioned from sandwich baggies, toppling over into the grass, with people scrambling to leave.

Everyone ill from something no one could explain. What the news first had called hysteria, which everyone wished was true. If only it were that.

And finally, at the dark, water-soaked end of Wilderleigh Street, an area of limited sun penetration, there'd be the anemic figures of my wife, Claire, and me, shuffling from the house to the car, carrying one item at a time, loading up for a getaway, with Esther, our only child, thank you God, nowhere in sight.

Do the math on that.

3

In the months before our departure, most of what sickened us came from our sweet daughter's mouth. Some of it she said, and some of it she whispered, and some of it she shouted. She scribbled and wrote it and then read it aloud. She found it in books and in the mail and she made it up in her head. It was soaked into the cursive script she perfected at school, letters ballooning with heart-dotted *i*'s. Vowels defaced into animal drawings. Each piece of the alphabet that she wrote looked like a fat molecule engorged on air, ready to burst. How so very dear.

The sickness washed over us when we saw it, when we heard it, when we thought of it later. We feasted on the putrid material because our daughter made it. We gorged on it and inside us it steamed, rotted, turned rank.

Esther sang as she walked through the house. Her voice was toneless, from the throat, in a frequency high in warding power. A voice with a significant half-life, a noxious mineral content, that is, if it could be frozen and crystallized, something then beyond our means or imagination. If her voice could have been made into a smoke, we would have known. If you heard it you were thoroughly repelled. She muttered in her sleep and awake. She spoke to us and to others, into the phone, out the window, into a bag. It didn't matter. Nice things, mean things, dumb things, just a teenager's chatter, like a tour guide to nothing, stalking us from room to room. Blame and self-congratulation and a constant narration of this, that, and the other thing, in low-functioning if common

rhetorical modes, in occasions of speech designed not particularly to communicate but to alter the domestic acoustics, because she seemed to go dull if she wasn't speaking or reading or serving somehow as a great filter of words.

She did it without thinking, and she did it to herself, and it was we alone who were sickened.

But of course we'd find out it was others, too. Others and others and others.

What she said was bitter, and we sipped at it and sipped at it, her mother and I, just ever so politely sipped at it until we were sick, because this was the going air inside our house, our daughter talking and singing and shouting and writing.

Whatever we thought we wanted, to hug or kiss our daughter, to sit near her, it was our bodies that recoiled first. We cowered and leaned away from her words, we kept our distance, but Esther was a gap closer, bringing it all right up to our faces. Some sort of magnet was in effect. A father magnet. A mother magnet. As we fled, Esther gave chase. We covered our ears and she talked louder. Our daughter seemed not to care who was listening, and we were ready at hand, ready to service her needs. We stood up to it and took it like parents, because doesn't the famous phrase say: *shit on me, oh my children, and I will never fail to love you?*

We'd heard this at the forest synagogue from Thompson during an intermission, when Rabbi Burke allowed his staff access to the radio transmission, and we'd sat in the hut nodding our abstract consent to such a promise. Yes, of course we would love our daughter no matter what. How ridiculous to think otherwise. *Ridiculous*. It was so easy to agree to what did not test us.

The sickness rode in on my name. Loaded and weaponized. Samuel, which Esther was old enough, her mother and I thought, to call me. A little grace note of parenting, which seemed to work for other people, and which we proudly took up as though we had invented it. But Esther wasn't impressed by this privilege. She barked my name until it became an insult, said it louder, softer, coughed it up and spat it at me.

We had missed the warnings on this one, phrases transmitted to our synagogue, the rabbi's droning cautions. *And they were killed with their own names*. From the Psalms. *Beware your name, for it is the first venom*.

Revelations. These warnings had always seemed like metaphors, the wishful equations of some ancient person's mind. Little comfort, in the end, and it wasn't my name alone that was toxic, but all of them.

It came in hello and good-bye and any little thing she said. Except Esther didn't much say hello. When she didn't use my name she said *Hey* and *Daddy*. She said *Ciao* and *Okeydokey* on her way out, language she shared with some of the gender-neutral underlings, incapable of eye contact, she prowled around with, and with fingers I dragged my mouth to smile, even though it fell slack again when I dropped my hand.

The reasoning, when reasoning seemed possible, was simple. Better to stand up to those happy moments, if that's what they were, and give Esther a father who wasn't such a spoiler, who didn't turn pale on the occasion of even the most basic speech. But my face leaked force each time. A daughter was someone to pretend to be healthy for. A daughter shouldn't see such sickness. *Your child will be the end of you*, Rabbi Burke had not yet said. I could speak back to her, and I could hear, technically I could. I could ask about school, or the feuds that consumed her, the massive injustices, often by omission, perpetrated by her friends, but the words felt foreign, like they were built of wood. A punishment to my mouth just to extract them, like pulling bones from my head.

That this poison flowed from Jewish children alone, at least at first, we had no reason to think. That suffering would find us in ever more novel ways, we had probably always suspected.