“Rooms” by Anna Likhtikman

His heart suddenly flipped over in his chest. "Just like a carp in the kitchen sink," Grigory Katz thought. To calm himself down, he stuck his nose into his scarf and breathed in his own warm air for a few seconds. Then he began to watch the tracks where a train ought to appear, but it was late and instead he ended up watching, like an eager child, another train pulling up to the next platform. Since he was untroubled by the trifling concerns of passengers, Katz was already enjoying the sight of that other train slithering along like a gray snake, adroitly swerving like mercury around the bend and then pulling up to the platform with inexorable stately majesty, like a wave, and just like a wave — iridescent — the lights of Tel Aviv were reflected on it. The train was gone, but Grigory Katz's curiosity, like a warm wasp, had awakened and hung in the air, quivering, somewhere to the side, and then, with a sense of relief finally descended into someone's bag. Katz saw a man's swarthy hands groping around for something in the bag, then taking out a tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush and putting them into a backpack. This was clearly well thought-out beforehand: the man had already known where the bag would be and that the backpack was close by, and for some reason Katz felt contented to be privy to the other person's minor logistical considerations. The young man looked like an Indian. What awaited him today — a night in a stranger's house, a stay in a hostel or a night flight? No matter what it was, Katz knew that there would be people and places the fellow didn't know, and it would take place just before nightfall, which concerned and agitated the man slightly; Katz envied his anxiety, and he happily and tenderly imagined the other man's evening. But then he immediately felt sad. He was like a stray dog that walked alongside people, taking a few steps with everyone who went by. When will I finally have a home? He did have a home, but after the loss of his daughter and the death of his wife, for some reason he constantly forgot it.

But he had something better. He had the street. He now looked at the poor and homeless in a different way. He recalled hearing that some of them stubbornly refused to go into the warmth, to sleep with a roof over their heads, and now he understood that some of them felt more comfortable on the street. He couldn't decide if grief had made him hard, or if a slice of life had been revealed to him — truly opened to him — and so it no longer seemed as dreadful as it had in the past. Now when he saw a homeless person on a bench, he saw in this unremarkable form a person whose kettle was just about to come to a boil on the stove. And sometimes he was right. Maybe not about the kettle, but look, for example, at the two men playing chess with a plastic cup instead of a queen. Next to them a bottle of cola, half-drunk, stood on an old advertisement. Now Katz never **agonized** over whether or not to give a handout. He could grope around in his pockets for a long time, looking for the exact coin he wanted to give, and then secret the rest of his money back in his pocket without being embarrassed. Did he feel like one of them, was the street his home? Of course not. Katz loved warmth and comfort, but it was on the street that he was able to have his "rooms" — that's what he called the small but perceptible spaces that sometimes appeared during his brief contact with strangers.

His housing — a clean little corner apartment in a freshly built house that he moved into after his wife's death — had frozen and turned into something ethereal and transparent. The plastic drop cloths that he had left up after the walls were whitewashed certainly added to the apartment's unsubstantial aura, but there were more tangible signs. From time to time the apartment gave up to him its airy fauna: pale lice, ants with rickets (both of them were weak, semi-transparent). There were completely extraordinary little spiders with beadlike bodies and the most delicate, awkward legs — he was terrified of hitting them with his mop. Sometimes he found their fragile, white cocoons in the corner. Then ethereal flora appeared. In the sink where he once washed his clay-covered boots with reckless bachelor abandon, a tiny lavender flower on a white stem grew out of the drain, and next to it another one sprung up, this one with a bud curled inward, like a large-headed fetus. Perhaps all of those creatures were waiting for him to buy a lampshade to cover the bare lightbulb, and then, in soft interior lighting, they'd warm up, take on whatever it was they should have had — fuzzy legs, whiskers or pigmentation for heaven's sake… But Grigory Katz didn't buy a lampshade. He quickly walked down the bare winter street that smelled of porridge, then of rubber and then for some reason of magic markers, and he stopped at the crosswalk; on the other side of the street a woman waited at the crosswalk just like him, and then they were walking in opposite directions across the black and white stripes, and their movement toward each other had an extraordinary painterly quality, a kind of symmetry fraught with meaning, and Katz lost heart and wanted to shamble along clumsily to shake off the solemnity of the movement, but he didn't give in to it and passed her without speeding up or looking at her, sensing how a room took shape: an entire life lived with that woman — the room hung over the intersection… but like an architect testing the durability and beauty of a structure, he walked down the sidewalk and strode on, led by the beacon of a yellow orange in the mesh pocket of a big strapping fellow, but then he immediately forgot about it because the shawarma vendor had put speakers on the street playing whooping and hooting, and Katz had already become a gangster crossing Harlem at night: he did the first take, and that very first take was a good one — he could tell — and walked along under the gaze of the cameramen and makeup artists, walked across dozens of monitors, walked, slouched and bounced along, and he forgot that he had meant to sit at a table and have a bite to eat, but it was too late – he'd already moved on, he never ate on the set, the king of hip-hop needed a light, empty stomach so no shawarma for him now — and then he'd gone by, it was history now.

He loved being outside his house more and more and began to live only in his street "rooms." He stretched out his walks when he had somewhere to go, and if he had nowhere to go, he organized fake forays on errands with meticulously invented legends. But no one asked him about them, and no one had any intention of catching him in the act. But most important — and this was amazing — his morbid, **insatiable** curiosity went absolutely unpunished. People didn't notice his attentive gaze, probably because his body's overall **benign** contour was immediately perceived as nonthreatening. That was certainly true, but for some reason he still felt like he was a scout on reconnaissance, or maybe — however embarrassing to admit — a secret agent. Someone whose life was in danger because "he knew too much."

Because, actually, he did know too much. All he had to do was get on the tram and he already knew about the love between the tall, gray-haired man and the older woman sitting up front. When they got off and a student carrying a cardboard portfolio sat in their place, Katz again somehow knew that this boy, an artist, was, unfortunately, completely without talent. "Why is he without talent?" he asked himself sternly. "How can you say that, off the top of your head?" "I can," someone very calm and merciless replied, and deigned to explain. "His portfolio is too thin. The boy is a slacker. And on top of it, he doesn't have drive." (The artist thoughtfully itched his long neck which had a boil coming to a head at the spot where the chain of his feeble, scrawny vertebrae began.) "Go on, take a good look," the same merciless voice said to Katz, indicating the boil as if it were **incontrovertible** proof of **mediocrity**. "Look! What did I tell you?!"

Katz suspected that his grief was to blame for all this. It was his grief that gave him this stern new way of seeing, this new person to talk to, whom he both loved and hated. If he turned that gaze on his wife or daughter, what would he have seen? Would he have begun to loathe them or would he have loved them even more? Suddenly he wanted to look there, into the past, using his new lens. He squinted, expecting to see at least something that would tug at the edge of memory, like pulling the corner of a silk scarf.

He recalled, of course, some bit of nonsense. He remembered blindly groping in her handbag. (She had asked him to get money to pay the gas bill — her hands were covered with flour.) He was amazed by the black sateen lining. He recalled the handbags of his mother and grandmother from his childhood, after the war, with red satin or dark blue velvet mouths exhaling warm breath that smelled of the theater. His wife's handbag — actually not a handbag but a shoulder bag, to be exact — was spacious and empty. He groped around until he found her wallet and one other thing, which surprised his blind hand. It was a vial — a glass pyramid. He held the vial in his hand, it was a perfume bottle, probably French. The black obelisk shimmered wickedly and seemed to have been specially made to be awkward — no matter how you turned it, it wouldn't lie in your hand. He said, it seems, to his wife then, "This thing — you could kill someone with it. Do you really carry it around with you?" "That's why I carry it," his wife laughed, "for self-defense." But his mother and grandmother never carried perfume in their purses. They stood in front of the mirror and tapped out several drops onto a handkerchief. But it would have been stupid to tell her that; fashions change. Now that he thought of it, how did it smell, her perfume? He couldn't remember. She never put on perfume at home in front of the mirror. She put it on somewhere else, at work. In the cloakroom? The ladies' room? Where? And for whom, by the way? Should he try to direct his new gaze on the black pyramid, screaming at it soundlessly "Attack!"? But he didn't want to. He wanted to remember how pleasantly squat the base of the bottle was, how he peered at the glass in the ashy half-light. And his heart flipped over again and he thought, "like a carp," and realized the similarity: although the heart beats constantly, we don't notice it, but when we do, we get scared, as if it were bad to be beating, although it's the opposite — it's a good thing. Those carp were called "live fish," but they were dead, and everyone knew that they were dead, and that's why people were scared when a fish flipped over — it was unexpectedly alive and it frightened them. He leaned against the wall, unwinding his scarf, and, smiling, remembering how the carp slapped his tail and grandmother and mother squealed and jumped back from the sink.