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October 8, 2018 [Short Stories](#) [2]

Short Story by Sidura Ludwig



Isaac is not sure how he ended up in his car being directed by his eleven-year-old grandniece.

"Park around the corner," Ava tells him. She wraps a red leash around her hand like a bandage, winding it tight until the tips of her fingers turn red.

"You're not supposed to take something that isn't yours," Isaac says. How she could have missed this lesson? Doesn't Elaine send her to that Jewish day school? Isaac never went to Jewish day school, but he knew the Ten Commandments. Everyone knows the Ten Commandments. Especially Number Eight: *Thou shalt not steal*.

"No one is looking after him," Ava says, watching out the side window at the sidewalk. "This isn't stealing. It's rescuing."

The entitlement. But still he sits there with her, behind the wheel.

"There he is!" Ava calls out, opening the car door before Isaac can grab her arm. Is that what he's supposed to do, as her great uncle and not her parent? She's running up the street, yelling, "Cookie! Come here, Cookie!" and she's waving the leash like it's something any dog would come running toward, not away from. Cookie is one of those tiny dogs that remind Isaac of the petite, skinny mothers he sees at the Promenade Mall when it's too cold for him to walk the neighborhood. The ones with double strollers and cup holders for their Aroma lattes. They have high voices and throw their heads back when they laugh.

Cookie and Ava chase each other around one of the trees on the boulevard. Cookie crouches with his butt up in the air, tail wagging. Ava laughs, crouching down in front of his pointy face, curling her finger at him and whispering. He leaps into her arms to lick her nose and chin and cheeks. She drops the leash and leaves it on the ground as she walks back to the car, cradling this dog like a baby.

Isaac looks up and down the street. No one has come after the dog. Ava told him the dog's been walking loose for days. She told him this when he was crouched beside her among all her Lego on Elaine's living room floor. She was playing with a set built to be a veterinarian's office. The little Lego people were all girls with the same plastic hair style in different colors—blonde, red, black, poofy at the top and then curled up at the bottom just past their shoulders. One had her arm stretched out to pat a pony, and there was a white rabbit lying at her feet. Ava said she has to save this dog because otherwise he could get hit by a car. Or kidnapped. When Isaac said, "I guess when you put it that way...", she threw her arms around him and squealed, "You're the best!"

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Did Isaac give in too early to his younger sister? There was nothing drawing him back to Toronto. It's not as if he left on good terms, fifty years ago. A lifetime of births and deaths, of people from his family growing up and leaving and only knowing him through photographs, postcards, the odd trip in for a wedding or bar mitzvah. Before Thornhill, this north suburb of Toronto, Isaac lived 27 years in Melbourne, seven years in Israel, ten in New York, two in Barcelona. For the last three years, he lived in LA, selling videos for a friend through eBay, renting his friend's apartment with a terra-cotta patio and a palm tree for shade. He was sitting out on that patio, shirt untucked, forehead sweating from the intense morning sun, when he got the call from Elaine. She was sobbing. And Isaac's younger sister never sobbed. Not after her daughter Carly left the kids to take a trip to Las Vegas with some girlfriends and then decided not to come back. Not after her husband of almost forty years died of an aneurysm two years after that. Elaine got quiet when she was sad. Resigned. She would say things like, "I have to be strong for the kids."

But now she sounded completely different. She cried so hard she hiccupped. Isaac thought something had happened to the kids.

"I'm all they've got, and that's not enough. They need more family."

"They have each other. Like we did." It sounded like the right thing to say. And she didn't argue with him.

"What if something happens to me, Isaac? What if I'm the next one to go?"

"Are you sick? Lainy, what are you telling me?" Be it God, karma, the universe, Isaac had had enough of the injustices lobbed at his sister, a woman who did nothing but make sure the people she loved were looked after. When would she be rewarded?

She'd stopped crying and took a deep breath. Isaac heard her exhale slowly, evenly, as if she were counting out her breath for five. She took another one and cleared her throat.

"I need your help. For just a little while. You don't have to live with me. I know someone you can rent from. But you could be here for meals. Maybe you could take the kids out every once in a while."

"You want me to move there?"

She went quiet. He imagined her in her kitchen, her table covered in the morning's paper, the kids' breakfast dishes still in front of their seats. Elaine with one hand holding the phone receiver to her ear, the other holding her forehead.

"Isaac, I've never asked you for anything."

That was true. When their father had been dying and Isaac was in Australia, she never once said, "Why aren't you here?" Isaac had still owed his father money, and if Elaine knew, she'd never asked when he planned to pay back the estate. She'd never once questioned when he would settle down, never implied—as others had—that his solitary life was worth less than hers.

"I just can't imagine what I could do to help." But he knew he owed it to her to try. Not that he ever felt he owed anything to anyone.

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"Drive," Ava tells him.

"And just where am I supposed to go?"

"I don't know. You were supposed to figure that out. We can't go home yet. Bubby's not going to let me in with a dog. And even if I hide him in my room, Adam will tell on me."

"You haven't thought this through."

Cookie wiggles out of Ava's arms. He whines, stretching his neck toward Isaac. Isaac's throat tightens. He wishes he were back in LA. Or Melbourne. Or New York City. Or any of the many places where he's lived alone in his 72 years.

On top of Cookie's whining, Ava has started to cry. Her face is buried in the dog's back. Now Isaac can see what he didn't notice before: They look alike, their scraggly unbrushed hair, knotted, hanging in clumps. Their thick bellies, their begging eyes. Ava says, "Uncle Isaac, please. We need to look after him. You need to help me."

Driving, Isaac thinks of Elaine, who is now older than their mother was when he left. When she's dealing with Ava and Adam, she looks so much like their mother did—her wrinkled forehead, the lines by her eyes and her mouth turned down when the kids tattle on each other. He thinks about his niece Carly, who was raised in this supposedly good neighborhood. But even people from good neighborhoods make shitty choices. He thinks about how Ava probably cries at night in Elaine's house, in Carly's old bedroom, how there are nights he finds himself crying, too, up late watching something on the History Channel. Like the documentary about the Gimli Glider, the story of a plane in 1983 going from Montreal to Edmonton that ran out of fuel, and the pilot glided it safely on the runway of the tiny airport in Gimli, Manitoba. There he is, balling like a baby at the pilot's heroism. By the time he's reached his apartment with Ava and Cookie, he wonders, why shouldn't she have some happiness? Maybe that's why he's here.

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Isaac's Russian landlady is away for the weekend, so when Cookie barks and runs around the basement, Isaac turns to Ava and says, "I'll take you home, and he can stay with me for one night. But by tomorrow, you need permission to keep him."

"I will," she says. "Bubby said we could get a dog sometime. And I'm gonna train him. She won't even know he's there."

Before Isaac takes her back home, Ava sits on the floor and rubs Cookie's tummy. She finds the spot that makes him thump his leg. Ava tells Isaac about her gymnastics class on Sundays, about how she's in the most advanced level with all the older girls. Back in LA, Isaac had some friends with grandchildren. They talked about their

schoolwork—reading (Shakespeare!), music (Mozart! At her age!), swimming (In the deep end! She's only five!). One had a granddaughter who was Olympic material. Isaac thinks now, Hey, look! Me, too! Did you ever think?

"Can I show you my splits?" Ava asks, and then she stretches her legs out, but she's no gymnast. Her back leg is bent. She's high off the ground. Isaac can see that she's as far down as she can get and she holds her breath until her face turns red.

"Hey," he says. "Yeah, that's really good." She just needs to practice. Everyone starts out somewhere. Isaac once saw a cover of a journal that said, *Don't compare your beginning to someone else's middle*. He should show Ava that.

Ava sits back down on the floor, and Cookie puts his head in her lap. She smiles up at Isaac and says, "You'll come to my show at the end of the year. The parents come to watch us do our gymnastics. Grandparents, too. But I'll be the only one there with an uncle!"

"Sure!" Isaac says. Maybe he'll even take a picture on his phone. Send it to the friend with the future Olympian.

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But the next morning, Elaine pounds on his door at 9 a.m. Since coming to Toronto, Isaac has not woken up before 11. Cookie snores in the bed beside him. He sounds like he's growling, like he could wake up ready to attack. Elaine is screaming.

"Isaac! Open up right now! I know you can hear me!"

He has never heard her under the influence of such fury. Isaac's head feels like it's filled with cotton. He sits up in bed before opening his eyes. Her voice is muffled, as if she's screaming through a pillow.

The dog has already jumped off the bed before Isaac puts his feet on the floor. He ties his bathrobe around his bulging waist, knocks over a stack of books on his night table while fumbling for his glasses. Elaine pounds again and yells, "Now, Isaac, before I call the police!"

On the other side of the door, Isaac finds not only Elaine but a sobbing Ava, her arms crossed, her nose blotchy red and running.

"For heaven's sake," he says. "You want to wake the neighbors?"

Elaine looks down at Cookie, wagging his tail, jumping up on his hind legs. "Oh my God."

Ava, despite her tears, falls on her knees and smiles as Cookie licks her wet, salty face. "See?" she says. "I told you he loves me."

"I can't believe you went along with this," Elaine says. She doesn't take off her coat or move from the entranceway at the top of the basement stairs. Isaac's feet are cold from the linoleum floor; the late-November air is coming through the side door, which was not closed properly. He shifts his weight from side to side, stepping up and down, like a runner warming up on the spot. She sounds so much like their mother yelling at him about the money. His tongue feels just as heavy now as it did back then, the weight of all his empty excuses.

Elaine keeps talking. "What were you thinking? What were you going to say to the cops when they arrest you for stealing?"

"This isn't stealing," Isaac says. "It's rescuing."

"Oh my God!"

"The dog was outside all on his own. It's better than me taking him to the pound. It would have been irresponsible for

us to just leave him there.”

Elaine walks into the apartment, past Ava and Cookie and over to the small folding table and chairs Isaac has set up in his main room. She sits down and leans forward with her elbows on the table, her head in her hands. She rubs her forehead with her fingers.

“Have you lost your mind?” she sighs, turning around, her head tilted. She looks at him the way she looks at her grandchildren—tired, fed up, her cheeks sagging, disappointed.

Isaac did not ask to be tested like this. He never loses his mind. In his experience, people only ask you that when they refuse to see your point of view. Elaine had to know that Isaac was never going to change. She needed his help, and he would give it in his own way.

“This isn’t about me,” he tells her. “This is about doing what’s right. It’s about saving this dog from one day getting hit by a car!”

“Uncle Isaac.” Ava says his name and then hiccups. Cookie barks. He waits for Ava to hiccup again. “Bubby said if I take Cookie back and apologize, we can talk about getting a dog of our own.”



Elaine stretches out her arm toward Ava with the red leash dangling. “Ava, take Cookie outside to pee before he messes all over your uncle’s floor. You can wait for me out there.”

After Ava leaves, Isaac says, “So why are you letting her get a dog, then? Where’s the lesson in that?”

Elaine doesn’t look at him when she stands up. She pushes past him to leave. Isaac feels the silence in his apartment like a blanket settling over his head. Before walking out, Elaine finally says, “She’s nine. You’re the adult. I didn’t bring you here to complicate my life.”

"I didn't ask you to bring me here."

In his mind, he is already reaching for his suitcase before Elaine says she doesn't need him any more. That's how he did it years ago, bag in hand, out the door into a taxi before his mother could hear the door close.

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That night, Isaac picks up the phone and calls Elaine, even though it is after 10 o'clock. Tomorrow is the first night of Chanukah. He's supposed to be with her and the kids. When she answers, he says, "Maybe I shouldn't come tomorrow."

He pictures Elaine lying in the middle of her double bed, duvet pulled up to her chin, watching the news. Every night, Elaine watches CBC, even though Isaac's told her they're anti-Israel and that she's better off watching CNN. But she swears by that Peter Mansbridge anchor. Isaac can hear his authoritative baritone in the background when Elaine answers.

"If you don't come, where does that leave me?" she says.

"I don't know what you want from me."

"I shouldn't have to deal with all this on my own. And the same goes for you."

"I never said I was lonely."

Except that Isaac has always viewed loneliness as his most constant friend. He's always thought the only person you could count on is yourself.

"Do you know what it's like listening to all my friends brag about the trouble they have fitting their expanding families into their dining rooms for holidays? If you don't come tomorrow, it's going to be me making latkes for the kids, and that's it. I wouldn't even bother setting the dining room table."

"I don't even know what to bring for the kids."

"Just get them gift cards to Toys R Us. Or maybe one from PetSmart for Ava. We're getting the dog in the new year."

"You are?" Isaac can only picture Cookie, as if there is no other dog to be had.

"Well, what am I supposed to do? At least when they're smiling I feel like maybe I'm not screwing up their lives."

"None of this is your fault, Lainy."

He's not making this any better. He only makes things harder for her. He'll come tomorrow, one last time, his suitcase in the car, and they'll never realize when he drives off at the end what he really meant when he said good-bye.

Elaine doesn't answer right away. In the background, Isaac hears sirens from her TV. They sound tinny—like they're ringing from inside a can. She whispers, "You see? This is why I need you here."

It's like she's taken the suitcase out of his hand. She's steered him back inside. She's closed the door behind him, and he didn't even hear the bolt lock click into place.

...

Many years ago, before he left Toronto, Isaac dated a girl he quite liked. She was bookish. She knew her literature. They watched good films together. There weren't too many girls he considered his intellectual equal, but she was—and she was pretty. She had a soft face that rested in a smile when she was listening.

Once, she invited him over to meet her parents. He remembers that after supper, she went to lie down on the couch in the living room. He brought his plate into the kitchen. Her mother was impressed with his manners. Had he proposed, her parents would have pushed her to say yes. He came out of the kitchen and saw her father kneeling on the floor beside the couch, hand on his daughter's cheek, as if she were a child about to fall asleep. When Isaac remembers this now, it's not that he remembers being disturbed. The intimacy wasn't obscene. But the raw display of affection from them both, well, it was odd. He knew then that he would never feel that way toward her. More so, he could never be that kind of father, and she would expect that of the man she married.

The next day, he broke it off. They went for coffee. He doesn't remember her crying. He did it nicely—not like they do today with texting. He meant her no harm or disrespect. She asked him why, and he told her straight out, “I can't be something that I'm not.”

And that's the thing with Elaine and Ava. They both want him to be this hero. He really thought he could—at least for Ava. Saving that stupid dog. And he liked the way she looked at him, like helping her was as good as saving the world. That was the look the girl had shared with her father. Isaac never thought he wanted to be that person, but now here he is. And for heaven's sake, hasn't Ava had enough disappointments?

It's the middle of the night, hours since he spoke with his sister. Isaac lies awake and, for the umpteenth time, thinks how he should never have agreed to come. Now he has to live up to that look. And he never asked for that.

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Isaac drives to Elaine's for the Chanukah dinner with the two cards for Ava and Adam on the passenger seat beside him. They are both light blue, and Isaac is wondering why Chanukah colors have to be blue and white, the colors of the Israeli flag. Isaac lived in Israel when he was in his mid-twenties. He worked in the fields on a kibbutz. He ate red tomatoes and green cucumbers for breakfast with white sour yoghurt. At Chanukah, no one exchanged gifts. They just ate sufganiyot, jelly donuts covered in white powdered sugar. Back then, it made him think of Canada and the snow-covered sidewalks, his sister Elaine and her girlfriends giggling as they slid along the ice in their wool coats, clutching each other's arms. But he didn't miss it. Instead, he felt the soft dough of the fresh pastry on his tongue, the sugar melting as soon as it touched his lips, the warmth of a room full of people with hands stained brown from the sun and the mud, like those Maccabee warriors from the Chanukah story, living in the hills, planning something wonderful.

When Isaac hits the dog, turning onto Elaine's street, he thinks he's hit a squirrel.

“Shit,” he says, as he drives up the road, parks beside the curb outside Elaine's house. Those damn creatures dart out into the streets always at the wrong time, like they're playing chicken. He didn't even have a chance to react. A flash and then a thud and then the slight bump under his tires. In LA, Isaac once saw a coyote lying by the side of the highway, its fur blown up by the desert wind, its mouth open slightly, as if in mid-snarl. But the rest of its body was flat, as if the stuffing had been removed. As Isaac drove on then, he thought, *Well, at least it wasn't someone's pet.*

And now, Isaac jumps out of his car and runs back down the icy street, calling, “Cookie!” before he can stop anything from coming out of his mouth.

Even before he gets there, he can tell that the dog is on his side, his body flattened. Isaac bends down where Cookie lies curled on the road, blood pooling from his mouth and around his tongue, flopped to the side. The blood is dark, almost black against the pavement.

“Stupid dog,” Isaac says, kneeling down on the ground, putting his hand on Cookie's back. He can feel the dog's cracked ribs, and then he notices the way the legs are splayed, twisted like Ava's splits.

“Shit,” he says again. “Shit, shit, shit.”

From down the block, Isaac hears someone call his name. He looks up and can just make out Ava's silhouette on Elaine's driveway. She's frozen on the spot. She's just in a T-shirt and leggings. Her voice sounds small and light

when she calls out, "Are you here?"

Isaac calls back, "Go back inside. I just thought I hit a squirrel."

"Did you?"

He stands up in front of Cookie. "No, it's all right. I didn't. Go on back in."

He watches her walk back up the driveway, sees the screen door open and then close as she steps back inside. He turns back to the dog and takes off his scarf to wrap around the body. He has no idea where to take him or whose door to knock on. He'll have to tell Elaine quietly, in the kitchen, away from Ava, who will be playing Lego—that plastic vet hospital, saving those plastic animal lives.

Isaac picks up the dog and moves him to the boulevard and buries him beneath a pile of leaves. Cookie's face is distorted from the impact. His snout is twisted. Isaac's leather driving gloves get wet and clammy from arranging the pile—dead foliage, dead dog, and now with the wet leather, he smells like wet animal. He tells himself that Ava will have forgotten about Cookie with the new dog coming. Kids know how to move on. And he promised her that gymnastics recital. She'll tell everyone there that he's her uncle. Before he turns away to go toward the house, Isaac mutters at the pile, "You should have stayed home."



Art Information

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Isaac and Ava

Published on Talking Writing (<https://mail.talkingwriting.com>)



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