

S A R I M . B O R E N

Escape

1. My dad terrorized our babysitters. Not on purpose, of course. He would tour a new babysitter through our suburban ranch-style house in order to point out, in each room, which window to use as a fire escape. *Be prepared to break the window*, he advised, naming the object he felt best suited: fire extinguisher, large metal urn, sturdy plant stand. I knew he didn't trust anyone to make the right decision in an emergency, let alone a teenager in a fire. He was afraid of fire. And he only trusted himself.

Each time he led this tour my brother and I either hid or skulked around behind them, grimacing in mortification.

2. Photos from the family ski trip I was seven show me in a brown suede face mask, like a tiny serial killer. When my nose ran, the snot stiffened the leather above my lip into a frozen mustache. After the eight hour drive to Vermont from New Jersey, my dad insisted we *hit the slopes* at eight o'clock every morning, right when the ski lifts opened. The lifts were slow with long lines, the slopes icy, and the weather typical to New England in December: bitterly cold, or, if not below freezing, then raining or sleeting.

In preparation for my ski school class, my dad took me on my first chair lift. I asked if we could get the operators to slow the lift, like I saw them doing for other kids. He waved off the help. He could handle a chair lift, on the bunny slope no less. I was apprehensive. I'd seen him overreach. *How hard could it be?* he'd say. Hard, I

thought. It could be hard. Even if he managed, I wasn't sure he could make up for what I lacked.

We shuffled to the front of the line. The chair whipped around fast as I tried to coordinate my skis and poles and get my butt into the seat. As the lift rose, I started sliding off. My dad grabbed my arm and, now completely free of the chair, I dangled from his grip, all 45 pounds of me, plus skis. With the chair gaining height my dad made a decision. He let go. From about ten feet up.

I landed on my back, unharmed but hysterical. Later that week, after witnessing a friend cut her chin open on the T-bar, an even trickier type of lift that both drags and pushes a pair of skiers up the slope, I refused to ride it again. For the ski school race I instead climbed the entire hill, jamming the toes of my lace-up leather ski boots into the slope to gain purchase, while my dad carried my skis.

This was our vacation. This is how we “got away from it all.” We skied because we could.

3. There's a Yiddish expression, *Mccan leben*, which is shorthand for *You can live, if they let you*. As in: Those fuckers let us live and now we're skiing. Or boating. Or whatever.

4. My dad and his brother and father traveled to the Ukraine in 1941 from their home in Warsaw, leaving behind my dad's mother and sister. They hoped to salvage something of my grandfather's Ukrainian business, to liquidate capital after the Nazi invasion had frozen their assets in Poland.

When I was little this story came to me in bits and pieces, so I constructed my own narrative, papering over the gaps and complexities with a child's literal logic. My grandfather was a chemist, and did something with dried fruit. So I imagined my dad left Warsaw with his father and brother to protect a dried fruit factory. Knowing what was coming next, I thought: Forget about the factory. Stay home.

Months later they tried to return to Warsaw under false papers. The Nazis captured and imprisoned them for several weeks, with about forty other Jewish men. One evening they were sent outside to the recently constructed gallows. In the darkness, as they rounded the corner of the building at a run, my sixteen-year-old father ran off and hid in a nearby shed. He heard the sounds of men, his father and brother among them, chanting the *shema*, the prayer recited before death.

5. My family had a series of boats when I was a kid, the way that other families had a series of guppies or gerbils which inexplicably died and were quickly replaced.

We never got attached to a boat. We never named them. We *discussed* boat names endlessly, usually on some Yiddish theme: the favorite being *Mccan Leben*.

The engines often conked out (that's what we called it), once during a long trip to upstate New York. We were towed to shore. I'm certain that one, maybe two boats were struck by lightning in their docks, even though my mom insists this can't possibly be right. Later, my parents upgraded to sailboats. I think my dad wanted to put his energies towards a more complex challenge than a conked out engine.

One Fourth of July we sailed out to watch fireworks over the Statue of Liberty. On the return trip to our home port we ran aground on a sandbar at two in the morning. We rocked bath and forth for an hour, my seasickness medication conking out while I dry-heaved over the side. My dad raised the Coast Guard on the radio who asked for our vessel's name, one of the 30,000 small craft out for that night's celebration. We shouted suggestions at my dad: Brandeis! (my college) Adam! (his name) Sammi! (the dog's name). No one suggested *Mccan Leben*. Who would understand it? We couldn't even spell it.

When the Coast Guard came to rescue us they walked to the boat in bright orange wetsuits, backlit by a giant spotlight, like sea monsters from a 1950s horror movie. We were stuck about 50 feet from shore, just past the Coast Guard station.

I have no idea where this boating bug came from. I don't think my parents had happy childhood boating memories from Poland. But maybe that was the point. New country. New hobbies. My dad believed he could learn to do anything. Mostly through trial and error. Which is how he made it to this country in the first place: by his wits, sheer tenacious determination and a lot of luck.

6. I told the running-aground-on-a-sandbar story to a man I met at a bar, a sailing enthusiast. I'm not an enthusiast myself, no small wonder, so this story was my best effort to capture his attention. My family revels in these tales of near disaster, playing them for laughs, even as we enumerate our suffering during the actual events. But the guy at the bar wasn't laughing. I ratcheted up the drama. Still nothing. When I finished the story he looked at me distastefully and said, "It's not funny. You could have been killed."

What an idiot, I thought.

"Stuck on a sand bar like that. It's incredibly dangerous. The boat could have capsized, trapping you."

Dangerous? Uncomfortable, embarrassing, exasperating—sure, that was expected. Just checking into a hotel with my dad was a multi-layered drama, let alone sailing at midnight with no nighttime navigational experience.

“We’ve survived worse.”

7. After his father and brother were murdered, my dad tried to make his way back to his remaining family in the Warsaw ghetto. He couldn’t risk getting asked for papers so he jumped on the free train reserved for Germans. In Warsaw he learned that his sister Mina had died in a typhus epidemic. His mother was killed soon after. During the ghetto uprising, with the Germans bombing and setting buildings on fire, he acted as a courier for the ghetto fighters, moving from one improvised bunker to another. He was hiding in a bunker when the smoldering roof collapsed. Stumbling and falling into the cinders on the floor, he burned his hand and foot. The Germans captured him the next day and marched him to the Umschlagplatz, the collection point, to wait along with thousands of sick, injured and dying Jews for transport to the camps.

8. When I lived in Jerusalem my mom asked me to get her a painted Armenian tile, a popular souvenir. She wanted a small plaque to hang by the front door of their new, architecturally significant, soon-to-be retirement home. The customized plaque said *Mccan Leben*. But delivery people kept thinking they were at the wrong house, the house of a Scottish family. So we made another plaque to hang above it. It says *Boren*.

9. My mom is also a survivor, but younger than my dad by twelve years so her stories are different. She spent much of the war in hiding with her mother, passing as Gentiles but also living in the woods for months, until Ukrainians posing as partisans lured other Jews away to be killed. A family hid them in a barn where my mom and grandmother spent four months in a hole dug under a pig sty, the space too small for both of them to sit upright at the same time. My five-year-old mother began hallucinating in that sensory-deprived environment. The Christian family believed she was possessed by devil and made them leave.

10. The Ukrainian prison cell, packed with 40 men and boys was meant to hold about 10 and had no seats or beds. One of the prisoners turned out to be my dad’s Soviet high school French teacher, from the year my dad lived in the Ukraine. In the prison cell he told my dad a story, a parable, about the musings of a young Jew in Czarist Russia about to be inducted into the army:

If they will reject me, that will be fine, but if they induct me into the Czar's army, I'll have two ways out. Either they'll send me to the front, or they'll keep me in the rear. If they keep me in the rear that will be fine, but if they send me to the front, I'll have two ways out. Either I'll kill the enemy, or the enemy will kill me. If I kill the enemy, that will be fine, but if the enemy kills me, I'll have two ways out. Either I'll go to heaven, or I'll go to hell. If I go to heaven that's fine, but if I go to hell I'll have two ways out. Either I'll eat the devil, or the devil will eat me. If I eat the devil that'll be fine, but if the devil eats me, I have only one way out.

My dad repeated this parable to us and to friends and even at dinner parties when the mood struck him. He told the story not with the solemnity you'd expect, considering its source, but with a somewhat restrained glee, as if he had outwitted the devil himself, and planned to keep doing so.

11. He'd be the first to say that luck got him through three concentration camps. But it's that moment at the Ukrainian jail, that decision quicker than a breath, to run off, to slip away, to *stop following his father and older brother*, that I always think about: What would I have done?

And also this: at the first camp, Majdanek, a barber (and a prisoner himself) shaving the prisoners' heads in the selection area looked at my father's burned and infected hand and foot, and when the SS officer's back was turned, told him to walk quickly through the door on the right, the door to the showers. The door to the left, my father later learned, led to the gas chambers.

12. When I was fifteen my parents starting taking us skiing in Colorado instead of Vermont. In Colorado the sun shines most days, thick snow covers the slopes, and the lifts are both fast and easy to load. Atop the mountain, at almost 11,000 feet, we gazed at vistas so expansive that the succession of peaks seemed unreal, the depth and distances flattened by the profound scale until the long view looked like a painting. We returned to the same mountain every year. And every year my dad said: *Look at this. Look at this view. Look where we are.*

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