

smallpox's spread among native North Americans in order to break the Indians' [sic] resistance." Equally sobering is Hopkins' discussion of a laboratory-associated outbreak in London in 1973, and "the world's last cases of smallpox" in 1978, which occurred after Janet Parker, a medical photographer, was infected by virus that escaped from a smallpox laboratory.

If those ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it, it is incumbent on historians to render it with colour, wit

and insight — qualities that are somewhat limited here. Compared to newer works, such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1999) or even Edward Hooper's massive tome on HIV, *The River* (2000), this re-release is dry and monochromatic. This brings me to my largest criticism, which is less of the book than of its publisher, the University of Chicago Press. The merits of relaunching this particular volume (likely at the expense of another) seem questionable, and it bears asking

whether it was not just another attempt to cash in on post-9/11 fears.

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# Reference

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## Room for a view

## A convincing story

What if Ben-Izmael's wife wasn't raped exactly when she said? I have a report that documents his torture and her rape. The problem is dates. Places, times, float; memory dislocates. Why don't the authorities believe me?

I have several cases from the Torture Centre, but his is the most difficult. At the first visit his burnt-coffee eyes are bloodshot. His left hand holds a folder. He is one hour late and stares into space.

I follow the zigzag of blood vessels in his eyes. "Mr. Benizmael? I am Dr. Isaacs," I say.

"Two words," he corrects me. "Ben-Izmael."

He brings his wife and three young daughters, dressed in party dresses, the only good clothes they have. They sit in the hospital waiting room like a still photograph.

"Please come." I lead him to my windowless office. Beside me sits a craggy man of thirty-five, long legs folded. "This is my student, Nick Tuculescu."

Tuculescu stands amiably. Ben-Izmael's eyes tremble.

"Uncomfortable?" I ask. "Is it the student doctor?"

"No."

"Is it the room?"

"Yes. Too small. A window, please."

I lead Ben-Izmael to the hall and ask him to wait. Tuculescu tenses. "He looks nervous. I can leave."

"It's what the room represents," I say. "Make yourself inconspicuous."

We smile. Tuculescu is six foot six, the tallest clerk in his year. An escaped Romanian surgeon, he persisted at jobs — orderly, taxi-driver — then re-attended medical school. He promises to tell me his story one day.

I unlock one door, a second. Inside, chairs form a circle. From the ceiling hang cameras, microphones.

Ben-Izmael stiffens. A large one-way mirror takes up an entire wall.

"Who watches us?"

"No one."

Ben-Izmael stares at the mirror. "What is inside?"

I open the door. "Look."

The examination begins. "Tell me your age," I ask.

"Thirty-six."

"Your birthplace."

"Oran. I am a schoolteacher."

"Any siblings?"

"So many questions you have." Ben-Izmael scans the walls and gazes through a window to the street. "I see abuses of government. Executions. That is my question."

"You spoke against your government?"

Ben-Izmael says, "I speak to foreigners. Police seize me. They put me in a small room."



"How small?"

"Two metre high."

"How long were you there?"

"Deux mois. Then a smaller room."

"Where?"

"Another prison. No window. No light."

"Solitary?" I say. "How long?"

Tuculescu's eyes close. Ben-Izmael looks away.

"How did they torture you? How long?"

"Cricket bats. They tape bats, to not break arms, legs. They hit each day. They give little food and water. Outside, men scream and die." He speaks in a dreamy distance.

"Did they hurt you other ways?"

Ben-Izmael's eyes shake. I abandon the question.

"Then, they release you?"

"One month later. They make sure I have no scars. My wife's brother is officer; he warns everyone. But two soldiers rape my wife, my son escapes with cousin."

"May I continue?"

Tuculescu is sweating. He excuses himself. Ben-Izmael says, "I fear for my lost son."

"Where did he flee?"

"L'Egypte."

"Did anyone report him?"

His eyes redden. "Find him, please."

Ben-Izmael has insomnia. He yells at his daughters in the single motel room where his family have lived for weeks. His wife cries, recalling her rape. The day of the refugee hearing nears.

"A father must protect his family," Ben-Izmael says.

"It is not your fault," I say.

"I have lost my son, my only son. It is unforgivable." Ben-Izmael pulls out a photo, a handsome dark-haired boy. "Find him," he says. "Find my son or I die."

I talk with my colleagues about his suicidal threats. I explain to them that he will not kill himself just now. He still has hope. They agree with me. Ben-Izmael is not yet certifiable. Returning him to a ward would be locking him into a cell. It would be putting him back where he came from.

The day of the refugee hearing, I am impossibly busy. So busy that Ben-Izmael phones me at midnight.

"It went well?" I ask.

"Non," he says. "*Pas de bonnes nouvelles.*"

I hear trains squeal. He is in the subway. "Mohammed. What happened?"

"They said no to my claim. *Pointe finale.*"

I am wordless. We worked for months on his claim. I stumble on the phone. What can I say? "Please. Go home. Don't hurt yourself. Go to sleep."

"Sleep is unsafe."

Mohammed has terrifying dreams.

Informers are everywhere. Asleep he returns to his cell to be executed.

I crawl under the covers. Nora, my wife, asks me who called.

"Ben-Izmael's claim failed."

"Poor soul," my wife says, and kisses me. "You did your best."

No. I have fallen short. I cannot sleep that night.

I see darkness and death.

At six am snow drifts outside. I peer into my daughters' rooms; their faces are soft in sleep. I leave for work in darkness. At nine I call Ben-Izmael's motel room to make sure he is there, to remind him of his appointment with me at two. At noon, after morning patients, I have five minutes free. I sip coffee, gobble a tuna sandwich and call Paxton, his lawyer.

"On the part of whom?" the receptionist demands.

"Mohammed Ben-Izmael, a claimant."

"Mr. Paxton's busy."

"I'm his doctor. It's an emergency."

"Doctor, I'm sorry. He's busy."

Twice I phone. Paxton does not call back.

Ben-Izmael misses his afternoon appointment so I redial Paxton. Paxton keeps me waiting. "One hell of a credibility issue," he says. "They think he's lying. Who knows? They decided his claim was bogus."

"Why?"

"Dates," Paxton says. "Under oath he gives statements. Captured May 15, denouncing the government. Right?"

"He's confused. He's not lying."

"He left confinement after one month, right?"

"Of course," I say. "It's in the affidavits."

Paxton pauses. "In the hearing he alleges he was captured August 15. Can you believe August 15?"

"Impossible. It's May 15."

"His wife testifies she was raped before his capture. Two months before, she figures. March. Now she's not sure."

"That's what trauma does," I say.

"Memory fails."

"The two keep me running in circles.

Who the hell knows what's up or down? They contradict themselves and their damn files! The panel doesn't swallow it."

"What can we do?"

"I have cases waiting; we've exhausted Legal Aid."

"Can't you help anymore?" I say.

"No," Paxton says. "With respect, Canada has the easiest laws in the world. Any immigrant puts a toe here and claims refugee status. See?"

"I don't see."

"Doctor. Either he's lying or he has a death wish. I'll fax you the decision."

I hang up the phone.

That evening Nora asks me when I will be home. Sarah, our youngest, has another strep throat.

"Start her antibiotic again," I say.

"No," Nora says. "Sarah needs to see a real doctor."

I phone Marcy, an old friend, an immigration lawyer. Marcy will listen.

"They fled from where?" she asks.

"Algeria."

"Listen. Tribunals want to be convinced. They need consistent dates."

"Marcy. We're not doing drywall. People don't fit in right angles. They twist, bend. Trauma cases dissociate."

"Whatever," Marcy says. "You have a potential appeal. The regime is corrupt. Executions have been documented."

"So why is the hearing so intolerant? Can't they see how they terrify him? He dissociates. He loses time."

"Turn it around," Marcy says. "Why do claimants screw up dates? Why doesn't the wife report her rape correctly? Is the son lost? Why are Ben-Izmael's dates wrong? Don't lose objectivity. Make them tell a convincing story. Otherwise they go."

What if Ben-Izmael's wife wasn't raped exactly when she said? I have a report that documents his torture and her rape. The problem is that places, times, float; memory dislocates.

How do we tell a convincing story?

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