

EW & I
ZEEV SMILANSKY

ON

LOLA

&

*A SMALL
CHILD*

Alright alright. Zeev. Welcome back, sir. Returning to the spit-laden world of the Smilansky Headquarters, in which gallons of engineering details mix and mold with your constant hurtle through language.

A baby-sat boy and old Shmulik (his grandfather?) spend the day together in a frightfully transformative and ultimately hopeful exchange of circumstances; from eating at the table together to witnessing Shmulik's grand melt-down as he is usurped by a business partner. We walk a familiar frustration of your characters': the betrayal of progress and idea, the stymied inventor, 'that bastard at the office!'.

This time, your character has someone to bear witness to the horrible thing that confronts him. This phone call with Giora really brings your power to bear, Zeev, and its where, in my opinion, the musicality of your sentences rises like a spitting horse to smash its object to pieces. I could feel the spit on the end of the phone. I, like the child, was left in the black aftermath, wondering if the monster was coming for me next.

The child poses a delicate scene, constantly. His tiny buttocks in the air. His small gesture of agreement, to build together. His little hands on the cherry tomatoes. The way he calls peanut butter 'monkey'. There is a familiarity, an adoration, a care, that is given to the boy, that is challenged, of course, by Shmulik's own rage, but he navigated it in a fleshly manner, in a mature manner, and I was so pleased at how he and the boy started to merge identities. The boy, free. Shmulik, free. Only when the trappings of tenders and sewage systems start to creep back in, only when that horrible phone call ruins the tranquility of the scene, do we sense that the adult world with its dumb betrayals and, in Shmulik's eyes, its clouded vision, do things start to challenge us, torture us, even.

The story really works, Zeev. I'm fascinated by fascination, so when Shmulik goes into his delightful metaphor regarding the waste products of humans as a 'flow' of sorts, a 'tree', I'm all about it. The shit smells good, so to speak. Your language or your grasp of subject always peaks in those detailed moments as you follow an idea from its seemingly mundane entry-point to a more profound quest for merging it with *-how life is-*, at large. I did wonder at this line: "there

must be some deep and important conclusion to be drawn from the intermixing of the content of so many people”. It seems that, while Shmulik is granted the potential to dream metaphorically and to ‘philosophize’ about his more real pursuits, he doesn’t quite reach the thresholds of manufacturing actual wisdom from the work. Instead, it seems, we find it ourselves in his ultimate partnership with this child, building these Legos.

What if that played out more. I’ll tell you: I was less moved by the boy waking and working on these Legos alongside Shmulik than I was by the boy falling asleep outside the regard of Shmulik. I’m not sure if that’s because the scene with the Legos is somewhat.. movie-like? or ‘easy’ in some way? That may be my feeling. I compare it to the ‘exaggerated perfection’ that Shmulik is so disoriented or upset by in the kitchen scene, when he settles on looking at an ugly, faded painting to settle himself. Why does he allow for a vast, glorious new city, seemingly perfect in its construction and the genuine wonderful spirits of the newly-risen boy when the boy eating tomatoes in a romantically detailed kitchen causes him so much distress? Is it the purifying effects of his anger being released? Is there a baptism of sorts that we undergo, the spit and rage, after which we’re left able to be child-like there on the carpet? I think I can see that. It doesn’t upset me. I did nix the final lines, just because they lacked some of the sonic beauty of the ultimate line of the second-to-last paragraph. A morning scene has already, in some way, occurred, in the fact that the boy has fallen asleep, and then risen, the secondary family angle feels interposed and less connected to me, to me.

Since the story largely works, I would say some details about your styling. You’ve expressed, in the past, an itch to smooth any writing that might seem non-native. I’ve done my best to reverse any syntactic moves you’ve made, but by and large, there are far far fewer of them than in prior stories you’ve sent me. This may be deliberate. Or it may be a slightly different story style. Regardless, kudos.

I think there are a few catch-phrases you turn to often, in order to keep up this word-flow that you’re so fond of, phrases I’d be keen to consider heavily in editing. Notably: ‘and then’, ‘of course’; ‘he is of course da da da’.. I don’t think all

of the items that are ‘of course’ are as granted as you’d like them to be? Though sometimes I’m won by it, and say, okay Zeev, of course he does that, often I go, well, why is that ‘of course’?

Regarding that full-speed, only-comma styling on the whole: I think it’s most effective in two settings; the realm of idea, and less-so, in the realm of dialogue. There are areas where a simple period or more solid stop like a semi-colon or em-dash will give the reader a necessary breath to make a transition between subjects or space. If you’re intent on keeping the comma as your only major punctuation, I can’t stop you, but I will say that because it sometimes obfuscates what is *actually* happening, its poetic merit as a driver of language or a breaker of convention only holds so much weight in my judgement of whether the piece works or not. It can seem sloppy, which given how considered the story and its imaginative scope and the tools it employs are, doesn’t match. I believe that a single sentence with a hard stop, no matter how much you enjoy the run-on, does *work* that the run-on can’t.

The rant with Giora is gold. It’s the hinge of this piece.

The story with the girl and the booger is similar.

I’m comfortable everywhere you went with this thing and see very little as extraneous. I think you could do a 90% syntactic pruning, looking for moments of redundancy. For instance: he picks up legos and clears the floor and then sets the legos on a floor that had been cleared— becomes: he clears the floor and sets the legos on it. Some small prepositional details like ‘in’s’ becoming ‘on’s’ are noted throughout the work. But largely, you weave a daring, grotesque and caring space for me to live in. Another neat piece.

Now, to do with *Lola*:

The neighbors gather at the moksha again. There is a huddle in the streets as we wait for the mysterious Lola to appear, dangerous Lola. Wretched Lola to some. Lovely Lola to others.

Oh my. Zeev, this one won my little heart. You know I'm a sucker for some pure declarative statements, some short sentences, some unclear motives, and a screaming witch. This piece felt very very heavy; every line had something in it to both take immediately and also that dripped like chocolate in the pocket when I finished it. There's sustenance here. I really enjoyed *Small Child*, but this feels like it has been tumbled through the rock tumbler and come out with quite a bit of polish.

The dialogue takes a stance. Each character has a personal history that is not delivered on a platter but meted out in small doses. The child stares intently at the broad chin, not to effect change but because that is what the handed-off child does. The characters are familiar to each other, knowing each other's small cues. The history that is implied throughout is both necessary and between the lines.

On a general story arc: a set of neighbors await an old neighbor who never arrives. What is the deal with her.

We learn about her through the pictures, through how they speak about her father, through the deffest damn symbolism, the black Mercedes, the father's second mistress. That tension point with the egg truck and the kapo... I mean, this really feels like something you let drip out of you line by line, and I admire it in full.

Stylistically and syntactically, it's much closer to home for me. At times you lean on adverbs where they aren't necessary—e.g. 'the child studies intently the face'... 'study' in some sense carries intention within it. I've removed them where I see them. Their positioning in the sentence also tends to move your English register askance in some way. They could be shifted if you were inclined to keep them for some explainable reason: 'Izzy made an unclear motion with his head, shut completely his eyes' becomes 'Izzy made an unclear motion with his head, shut his eyes *completely*.'

But again, I feel you're better served by just shutting his eyes. We don't assume that he shuts them partway, so you're only doubly reinforcing something, or being redundant.

Titles, generally, capitalized. Mr. Weiss. Mrs. Whoever.

And then I think the dialogue. Some form of homogeneity. I'm not sure if it's a lack of trust, a lack of work, or a deliberate decision you've made believing certain lines of dialogue deserve different treatment than others, but I for the life of me, could not ascertain what rules you were operating under for using the - Blah blah blah, he said, vs blocky paragraph inline styling. Both work, just pick one.

I have to be a hundred percent honest: this piece is damn close to done. I would really consider shopping it around after you've cleaned up line by line. It really moved me and felt always on the edge of suspense, tension, memory, and possibility. Congratulations on this one.

In general, Zeev, I'm really glad to feel this place and your style is growing familiar to me. Seeing themes repeat themselves, watching you toil with your internal -stuff-, it's very rewarding to me. I think I grappled with Small Child significantly more, as I wanted to make it different than it was, make it more 'passable', but I also want you to know, if you're eager to pursue some degree of experiment, I'm open. I read a number of paragraphs aloud, both to myself, alone, and to Alyssa; I *-did-* need to take breaths in certain places that you did not provide punctuation, which suggests you either have much bigger lungs than me, or you're reading this differently than its scribed. You decide how near to the oral version of the story keeps with the written, of course, but you paid for my response, and there it is.

I'm going to attach a piece that was recently presented to me as an example of something in your vein. It's by a friend, so please don't spread it around too widely, but I think his sentence pausing and structure, subject matter and all—maybe even mode—all operate in a world you cast in as well.

Kin of sorts.

Regardless, very much hoping you push these pieces through your sieve again. They're very good, and your writing is always moist and well-received.

Cheers, dude, be well,
-ew