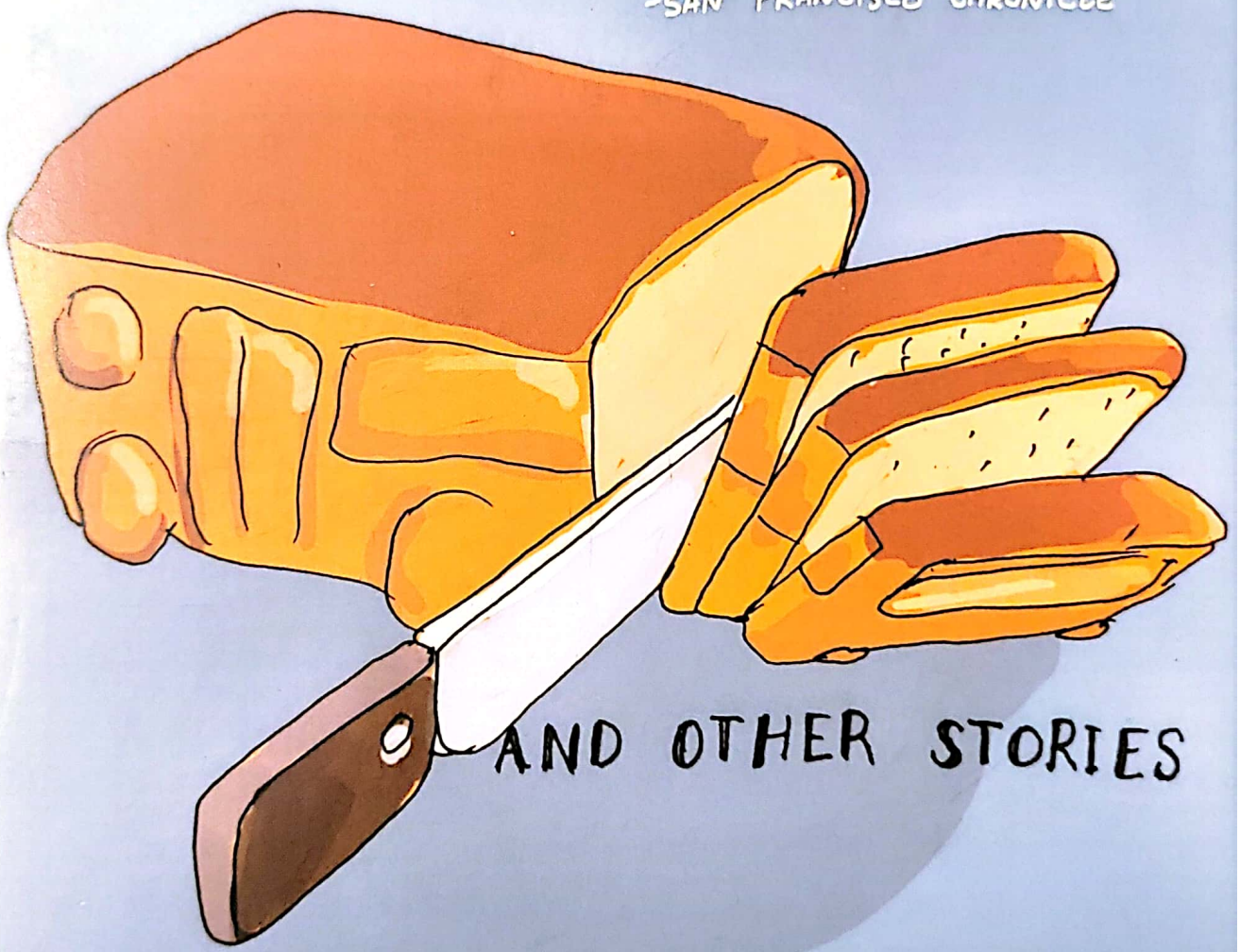
THE BUS DRIVER WHO WANTED TO BE GOD

"One couldn't have hoped for a finer way to herald this major new voice."

-SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE



AND OTHER STORIES

ETGAR KERET

author of THE SEVEN GOOD YEARS

Pipes

When I got to seventh grade, they had a psychologist come to school and put us through a bunch of adjustment tests. He showed me twenty different flashcards, one by one, and asked me what was wrong with the pictures. They all seemed fine to me, but he insisted and showed me the first picture again—the one with the kid in it. "What's wrong with this picture?" he asked in a tired voice. I told him the picture seemed fine. He got really mad and said, "Can't you see the boy in the picture doesn't have any ears?" The truth is that when I looked at the picture again, I did see that the kid had no ears. But the picture still seemed fine to me. The psychologist classed me as "suffering from severe perceptual disorders," and had me transferred to carpentry school. When I got there, it turned

out I was allergic to sawdust, so they transferred me to metalworking class. I was pretty good at it, but I didn't really enjoy it. To tell the truth, I didn't really enjoy anything in particular. When I finished school, I started working in a factory that made pipes. My boss was an engineer with a diploma from a top technical college. A brilliant guy. If you showed him a picture of a kid without ears or something like that, he'd figure it out in no time.

After work I'd stay on at the factory and make myself odd-shaped pipes, winding ones that looked like curled-up snakes, and I'd roll marbles through them. I know it sounds like a dumb thing to do, and I didn't even enjoy it, but I went on doing it anyway.

One night I made a pipe that was really complicated, with lots of twists and turns in it, and when I rolled a marble in, it didn't come out at the other end. At first I thought it was just stuck in the middle, but after I tried it with about twenty more marbles, I realized they were simply disappearing. I know that everything I say sounds kind of stupid. I mean everyone knows that marbles don't just disappear, but when I saw the marbles go in at one end of the pipe and not come out at the other end, it didn't even strike me as strange. It seemed perfectly OK actually. That was when I decided to make myself a bigger pipe, in the same shape, and to crawl into it until I disappeared. When the idea came to me, I was so happy that I started laughing out loud. I think it was the first time in my entire life that I laughed.

From that day on, I worked on my giant pipe. Every

evening I'd work on it, and in the morning I'd hide the parts in the storeroom. It took me twenty days to finish making it. On the last night it took me five hours to assemble it, and it took up about half the shop floor.

When I saw it all in one piece, waiting for me, I remembered my social studies teacher who said once that the first human being to use a club wasn't the strongest person in his tribe or the smartest. It's just that the others didn't need a club, while he did. He needed a club more than anyone, to survive and to make up for being weak. I don't think there was another human being in the whole world who wanted to disappear more than I did, and that's why it was me who invented the pipe. Me, and not that brilliant engineer with his technical college degree who runs the factory.

I started crawling inside the pipe, with no idea about what to expect at the other end. Maybe there would be kids there without ears, sitting on mounds of marbles. Could be. I don't know exactly what happened after I passed a certain point in the pipe. All I know is that I'm here.

I think I'm an angel now. I mean, I've got wings and this circle over my head and there are hundreds more here like me. When I got here they were sitting around playing with the marbles I'd rolled through the pipe a few weeks earlier.

I always used to think that Heaven is a place for people who've spent their whole life being good, but it isn't. God is too merciful and kind to make a decision like that. Heaven is simply a place for people who were genuinely unable to be happy on earth. They told me here that people who kill

themselves return to live their life all over again, because the fact that they didn't like it the first time doesn't mean they won't fit in the second time. But the ones who really don't fit in the world wind up here. They each have their own way of getting to Heaven.

There are pilots who got here by performing a loop at one precise point in the Bermuda Triangle. There are housewives who went through the back of their kitchen cabinets to get here, and mathematicians who found topological distortions in space and had to squeeze through them to get here. So if you're really unhappy down there, and if all kinds of people are telling you that you're suffering from severe perceptual disorders, look for your own way of getting here, and when you find it, could you please bring some cards, 'cause we're getting pretty tired of the marbles.