



VINTAGE

HOMESICK

ESHKOL NEVO

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Copyright

About the Book

It is 1995 and Noa and Amir have decided to move in together. Noa is studying photography in Jerusalem and Amir is a psychology student in Tel Aviv, so they choose a tiny flat in a village in the hills, between the two cities. Originally called El-Kastel, the village was emptied of its Arab inhabitants in 1948 and is now the home of Jewish immigrants from Kurdistan. Noa and Amir's flat is separated from that of their landlords, Sima and Moshe Zakian, by a thin wall, but on each side you find a completely different world. Next door lives a family grieving for their eldest son, killed in Lebanon. His younger brother, Yotam, forgotten by his parents, turns to Amir for friendship. And further down the street, as he works at the building site, Saddiq watches the house...

In this enchanting and irresistible novel, the narrative moves from character to character offering us glimpses into their lives. Each of them comes from somewhere different but there's much about them that's the same. *Homesick* is a beautiful, clever and moving story about history, love, family and the true meaning of home.

About the Author

Eshkol Nevo was born in Jerusalem in 1971. He spent his childhood years in Israel and America and studied copywriting at the Tirza Granot School and psychology at Tel Aviv University. For eight years he worked as a copywriter and then began writing short stories. He now teaches creative writing. Nevo has published a collection of stories, a work of non-fiction and this first novel was awarded the Book Publishers' Association's Golden Book Prize (2005). His second novel was a number one bestseller in Israel.

ESHKOL NEVO

Homesick

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
Sondra Silverston

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Prologue

In the end, he put all the remaining furniture out on the street. A friend was supposed to come with a van and pick it up. So he waited there. Sat down in an armchair and nibbled on a pear. A neighbour was washing his car, a hose in his hand. He remembered that when he was a child, he used to watch the streams of water running off the cars to see which would be the first to land. Now he looked at the time. Half-past eight. His friend was fifteen minutes late. That wasn't like him. Maybe, in the meantime, he should arrange the furniture the way it would be in a living room. Maybe not.

A woman whose bags he once carried from the shops made her way between the sofas and smiled at him as if she had something to say.

Another woman stumbled against the cabinet and grumbled: you're blocking the way.

TOPOGRAPHICALLY, WE'RE TALKING about a saddle. Two humps, and between them a shopping mall that's common ground for all. The hump where the Ashkenazim live is a well-tended town called Mevasseret. It has an air of optimism and the residents share it. The other, once a transit camp for new immigrants from Kurdistan, is a welter of shacks and villas, daisies and debris, tree-lined lanes and dirty streets. Its official name: Maoz Ziyon. Unofficially, it's called Castel, after the old army post on the top of the hill where soldiers fell during the War of Independence. Now it's a memorial site visited by their descendants. When you get there, right after the traffic lights, you'll find Doga and Sons, a small market with not much to it. But if you have a question to ask, that's where to do it.

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A random sampling of announcements posted on the noticeboard next to Doga and Sons: Course in practical Cabbala, call now and get a discount. New date set for the Boy Scout ceremony that was rained out. House calls by a certified cosmetician. Private maths lessons given by a qualified mathematician. Find your religious roots with Rabbi Itzhak Fein. The event will take place, rain or shine.

*

The man they asked at Doga made a mistake, and though they'd turned the right number of corners, Amir and Noa didn't find the apartment that was for rent, but ended up instead in a house of mourning. A large woman wept endlessly. Other women passed around trays of pastries and tea. No one noticed Amir and Noa, but they didn't feel right about leaving once they were there. Squeezed into a corner on the sofa, they listened to stories about the son killed in Lebanon and sneaked glances at their watches, wanting to be gone. Amir clasped his hands and thought: this is my chance to be really sad. Here I can stop trying to be happy and let the black squid ink of sadness flow through me freely. Noa played with her hair and thought: I have to pee. Funny how grief makes people want to eat.

An hour later, they stood up, nodded to the large weeping woman, made their way past knees and chairs to the door and went to find the apartment they'd been looking for.

But their passion in the search was gone, and they didn't feel the same urgency any more.

*

The apartment had two rooms. A living room the size of a kitchen. A kitchen the size of a bathroom. A bathroom with a squeegee to mop up the water that sprayed on to the floor from the shower. But none of that bothered them at all. And they didn't care that the landlord lived on the other side of the wall. Or that they'd lie in their bed with only an asbestos roof overhead. They'd decided to live together, nothing would stop them. Even though he was studying psychology in Tel Aviv and she photographed in Jerusalem. Mevasseret is a good compromise, she said. Tel Aviv isn't so far, considering you have a car. And I love the light here, she added, it's so bright, so clear. He took her hand, led her to the window and said: We can plant a garden over there. The landlord, sensing he was about to clinch the deal, said: It's not like the city. There's parking everywhere.

*

A month earlier, when we were still trying to decide, I had a dream. I'm pushing a heavy truck up the road to Jerusalem, pushing it from behind like Superman: from Lod to Modi'in, from Modi'in to Latrun, from Latrun onward. At first, I'm running effortlessly, the truck is flying forward and the wind is scattering my worries. But after the entrance to Sha'ar Hagai, when the road gets steeper, I suddenly start sweating and panting in an extremely un-Supermanly way. On the level section before the sheikh's house, I climb up to the Castel, I can barely breathe and the truck is barely moving. Cars honk at me, children looking out of windows point at me and laugh, but still I continue, loyal to some demanding international command, and with my last ounce of strength I manage to roll the truck to the top, to the Mevasseret bridge. And then, when I stop to catch my breath and take my hand off the truck for a minute to wipe the sweat off my forehead, it starts rolling backwards. On to me. I try to stop it, lean the entire weight of my body against it, but that doesn't help. My Supermanly strength is suddenly all gone, and now I'm just someone trying to stop a truck that weighs a hundred times more than I do. It's moving fast by the second. Shocked cars veer away from it at the last minute. A bus-stop support bends under its weight. And I'm running backwards, trying to slow it down by giving it small shoves and sticking a leg out in front of me, the way you do when you want to stretch your muscle. Despite my ridiculous efforts, the catastrophe – and this is clear to me in the dream too – is inevitable. And sure enough, at the bottom of the slope, a little before Abu Gosh, it happens. The truck hits a car that hits a car that hits a dividing wall. Twisted iron. Twisted limbs. A mosaic of glass and blood. The end.

When I woke up, filled with terror, I thought I understood the dream.

I called Noa and told her: Live together, yes. Closer to Jerusalem, yes. But not past Mevasseret.

*

Ah, yes, there's something else, the landlord said just as they were about to sign. Noa thought he was going to talk to them about the property tax or something like that. The neighbours over there, he said, lowering his voice a little and pointing to the house across the way, their son was just killed in Lebanon. So if you want to listen to music, try to keep the volume down. Of course, Amir said, no problem. We won't bother them, you'll see. And besides, Mr Zakian, Noa added, you don't know us yet, but we're a quiet couple. As quiet as can be.

*

I finally cried, but not because of what everyone thought – because my big brother, Gidi, had been killed, even though I loved him very much and my throat burned after the soldiers who came in the middle of the night left and Mum started screaming – but because all of a sudden I was sick and tired of no one paying attention to me. It all started when I cut my finger making salad for the people who came to the *shivah* and because of the onion that makes clouds around your eyes so you can't see where your finger is or where the knife is. The blood started coming out and filled the space between my nail and the pad of my finger – Mum taught me what to call that part of the finger – and Dad, who didn't do anything but fiddle with his pipe and sit next to Uncle Menashe without talking, said, can you see I'm busy, Yotam, why are you making such a big deal out of it, it's just a little cut, where are the plasters, go and ask your mother where the plasters are. But Mum was in the middle of one of her 'Gidi, oy Gidi's and all her friends were sitting around her trying to calm her down, and to get to her I had to walk past all of them, so I stood behind a chair in a corner of the living room, not sure whether to go back to Dad or break through the circle around Mum, and in the meantime, the blood had already filled my whole hand, which is a very scary sight, even though I'm not a chicken, and all of a sudden before I could control it and swallow the tears like I do sometimes when someone hurts my feelings

class, I started to cry, not a soft, small kind of crying, but a loud sobbing kind of crying, like a baby and naturally all the ladies jumped right up and made a circle around me, and Mum hugged me tight and Aunt Miriam, her sister, ran to get a plaster, and they all whispered to each other, poor child, they were so close, and yelled for Miriam to hurry up, and the television guy who was outside interviewing Uncle Amiram – the family’s official spokesman, not only because Mum and Dad didn’t want to talk but also because he’s the head of a department in the Electric Company and knows how to express himself – the television guy must have heard that something was going on inside and he came in with his cameraman and tried to shove a microphone into Mum’s mouth, but Uncle Amiram ran in after them saying, what are you doing, what are you doing, we agreed you wouldn’t film inside the house and the ladies shouted, get out, leeches, have you no shame, and started pushing the cameraman, they actually put their hands on his chest and shoved him till he was thrown outside with his huge cameraman and then they went at Uncle Amiram, why did you let them in? and he said, I didn’t, they just walked around me and went in, those bastards, and Aunt Miriam came back with a plaster and wrapped it around my finger gently, without hurting me, and stroked my hand and my cheek and whispered in my ear, I’ll make the salad, OK?

*

When you say the word ‘landlord’, you think of an older, annoying man. This is not the case with Moshe Zakian. He’s only a couple of years older than Amir (though he’s Sima’s husband and the father of two). A bus driver with a bald patch and a small potbelly hanging over his belt. He knows how to fix everything: locks, electrics, a blocked sewer. He doesn’t talk much, he’s more of a doer. And he’s crazy about his wife. Anyone can see that. The way he always moons at her, as if she were a movie star. He does whatever she says. Nods his head yes whenever she talks. And when it comes to talking, she’s one of a kind. Sharp tongue, sharp mind. You’ll enjoy being here in the Castel, she says when Amir and Noa arrive with their belongings, you’ll see. Everyone knows everyone else here, like a family. And it’s quiet, so you can study without any noise to bother you. I wasn’t always like this, she says, looking into Noa’s eyes, I went to college too. Took courses in accounting. But now I stay home because with the children, there’s so much to do.

*

It took us only a day or two to set up the apartment. After all, what did we have? Not much. A sofa from my aunt, a desk from her parents, a few chairs from friends, knick-knacks and bric-à-brac we accumulated separately in our previous apartments, some of Noa’s framed photographs on the wall, a mattress stained with our fucking, a TV with a colour button that didn’t work. And that was it. The first few days, after all those communal dumps we’d lived in, fighting about bills and waiting in line for the shower, we felt as if we were in a palace. A king and queen. A man and a woman. We could talk on the phone for hours on end without a second thought. We could fill the fridge with things we liked. We could walk around the living room in our underwear or without it. We could make love anywhere in the apartment, any time we wanted to, without worrying that a room-mate might come home early. All we had to do was lower the blinds beforehand. The neighbours across the way are still in mourning and we didn’t want to deliberately offend them.

*

Not enough time has gone by. This story is still bubbling away.

The only way to touch it is to dip a finger in it.

And snatch it out without delay.

*

The first picture in the album doesn't even show us, Amir and me, together. I mean together in the sense of a couple who can't keep their hands off each other. Modi took that picture, I think, at the hidden spring of the Dargot River. It was a surprise shot, no saying cheese and no posing, and that's exactly what I love about it. Even though it's overexposed and the focus is far from perfect, it captures something real. Everybody looks wiped out, in a good way, like after a long hike. Yaniv is stretched out with his hat over his face. Yael, who was his girlfriend then, is lying with her head of curls on his stomach, and one curl has dropped to the ground. Amichai is passing an army canteen to Nir, whose red cheeks show how much he needs it. Hila, the one who asked me to come along 'not to get to know the guys, just to get to know the desert', is looking for something in her bag, maybe a sweatshirt, because the tank top she's wearing is too thin for the wind that's blowing. Adi the bookworm is holding a book, something published by Am Oved, judging by the size, but she isn't reading it. Her green eyes are peering over it, smiling at Modi. She's the only one who knows he's sneaked up on us to take the picture, maybe because they were going out.

All of them – Yaniv, Yael, Ami, Nir, Hila and Adi – are more or less together, that is, close enough to each other to put them into an imaginary circle not very large in diameter, maybe three metres. Only two people are outside the circle: Amir and me.

Amir is sitting on a boulder that protrudes over the spring, hugging his knees to his chest, staring at everyone. I'm leaning against my bag on the other side of the spring, staring at everyone.

It's incredible how similar our expressions are.

Every time I look at that picture, I laugh. The two observers. It's no wonder it took us three days of mutual observation before we talked, three days of me thinking he was alternately ugly and handsome, interesting and tire-some, shy and arrogant, three days of waiting for him to hit on me and, at the same time, hoping he wouldn't. It wasn't till the fourth day, the last day of the trip, that I realised that if I kept on waiting it would end up being one of those might-have-beens, so I worked up my courage and made the most of a moment when we were far from everyone else, and asked him a stupid question: did he know why only the boulders on the right were coloured, and he said no, he didn't know, I didn't really understand that kind of stuff. He held out his hand to help me over the next boulder and the touch of his hand was soft, much softer than I'd imagined. But none of that has anything to do with the picture. I've got carried away.

*

A nice couple, I say to Moshe after the students close the door behind them.

Very nice, he says, folding the lease and putting it into his shirt pocket.

But a little strange, don't you think? I ask, pulling the lease out of his pocket and putting it into the binder we keep our documents in, where it's supposed to be.

What's strange? That they live together and aren't married? he asks and helps me put the binder back where it belongs.

No, don't be silly, that's very common nowadays, lots of couples move in together before they get married to see whether they can get along, if they're right for each other – not like you, who went and got married to your first girlfriend when you were twenty-one.

But it worked out great for me, Moshe protests, giving me a big smile.

OK, so it worked out for *you*, I smiled back at him, but I'm talking about the principle of the thing

What principle? Moshe asks, reaching for the TV remote.

Never mind, I say, it doesn't matter.

He turns on the TV. Sports. It looks like I'll have to explain the principle to my sister Mirit. She has a lot more patience with gossip. There's no getting away from it, women are women and men are men.

Sweetie, Moshe says suddenly, his eyes still on the game, do you remember that my brothers are coming on Saturday?

Yes, I remember. How can I forget? There's so much to do before they get here. I have to make sure the dairy knives don't slip into the meat knife drawer. Check that everything in the refrigerator is kosher, because regular kosher isn't good enough for them. Count the candles, and if we don't have enough, go to the store to buy some more. Turn on the hotplate before the Sabbath starts. Look for my kerchief. Wash it. And everything has to be finished by Thursday night, because they always show up early on Friday. They're afraid that a traffic jam – it doesn't matter how many times I tell them that there are no traffic jams at that hour – might make them late for the beginning of the Sabbath. And God forbid that Menachem, his oldest brother, the big rabbi from Tiberias, should think that anyone here is a slacker and doesn't come up to his standards. You don't know him, Sima, he'll make a big deal out of it, Moshe had explained to me all over again, every time Menachem came, for the past several years. And it made me mad all over again, every time. Who said it has to be like this? Why does Rabbi Menachem always have something to say about my clothes whenever we go to see them in Tiberias and when he comes here, why do we all have to do whatever he wants?

But I don't say anything. Not a word. I know how important it is to Moshe. And Moshe is important to me. I'm willing to do a lot to keep the peace. Almost anything.

*

On the first floor of Moshe and Sima Zakian's house, which our apartment clings to like a fungus on a tree, there are three rooms, a father, a mother and two children. On the second floor, in what is left of the original Arab house, live Moshe's parents, Avram and Gina, founders of the Zakian tribe: six children and almost twenty grandchildren. And on our first Saturday in the new apartment, we get to meet the whole clan. The occasion: a seventieth birthday celebration for the taciturn old grandfather. On Friday, the family arrives in dribs and drabs for the festivities. The first to make an appearance are their multi-doored pickups, dressed in black, are the Zakian children who have become orthodox and moved to Bnei Brak and Tiberias. After them, still well before the beginning of the Sabbath, come all the rest, with and without skullcaps. They all sit on plastic chairs on the small lawn made up of rectangles of pre-grown grass, the lines separating them still visible. They send Sima to ask the students to join them. No, thank you, we decline, we have papers to write. But Sima insists and takes hold of Noa's hand: haven't you heard, all work and no play ... Noa doesn't know what to say, so she goes along with her and I follow in their wake. Moshe gets two chairs for us, we smile in thanks and after Sima introduces us, she invites us to help ourselves to the food on the table: stuffed grape leaves, *kubeh*, rice made with a spice I don't recognise, salads and all kinds of sweets. The children, with and without sidelocks, play hide-and-seek, and the conversation flows pleasantly. It turns out that Yossi, Moshe's younger brother, is a photography buff, and Noa tells him a little bit about her classes – she notices that no one takes an overt interest in psychology – and when he asks her advice about which camera to buy, she explains the pros and the cons. The sun sinks slowly to the horizon between the rising Jerusalem hills and the conversation drifts to other subjects more closely related to family problems, solutions, childhood memories. An occasional Kurdish expression is tossed into the conversation, *kapparokh*, *hitlokh*, *ana gabinokh*, and they translate for us immediately so we won't

feel out of it – sweetheart, light of my life, I love you. I make my way through the cascades of Noa hair to her ear and whisper, *ana gabinokh, ana gabinokh*, and I think, there's an aura around us when we're together, an aura that keeps out loneliness. She grabs my hand under the table and whispers in my neck with an optimism that's rare for her, we got lucky with this place, didn't we?

*

Do you love me, Amir?

Yes.

Why?

What do you mean, why?

I mean, what do you love about me?

Lots of things.

For example?

For example, the way you walk. I really love the way you walk.

The way I walk?

Yes, quickly, like you're in a hurry to get where you're going.

What else?

Now it's your turn.

My turn? Hmm ... I love the way you are with people. The way you know how to say something real to people that will touch them.

You're like that too.

Not really, I'm harder than you are.

No, you're not, you're very soft, here, feel this. Yes, I really am soft there.

And in other places too.

Really? Like where?

*

I couldn't decide whether to take that picture. I was afraid that the click of the camera would wake Amir, he sleeps so lightly. And the way he looked – curled up on the grass in front of our bungalow in Amirim, like a kitten, and his long lashes and sleep-soft cheeks – that made me hesitate too. It occurred even to me, a chronic photographer, that maybe not everything should be photographed, maybe I'd just leave things as they were for once, not document them, keep them burnt only into my memory. But the light, the magical twilight and the composition, the squares of the Indian sweat inside the squares of lawn, the three oranges growing on the branches of the tree, and the forgotten torn basketball net that was just enough to keep the scene from being too idyllic – I couldn't control myself.

And of course, he woke up.

But he didn't complain the way he usually did. We were easy with each other that weekend, and with ourselves. We were good together. Not in retrospect, not out of nostalgia. Not in anticipation. But here and now good. Very good. I remember that in the morning we made love slowly and he touched every part of my body with his finger as if he were proving to himself that I was real, and it made me laugh and then it excited me. After we came, gently, and got under the blankets again, I told him about the Advil night. I'd never told any of my old boyfriends about it, not even Ronen, and we were together for almost a year. I was afraid it would scare them off, and only with Amir did I feel for the first time that I could let go of the secret, that he'd know how to keep it, so I put my lips against his

chest, as if a chest could hear, and I told him. He listened quietly, didn't get scared and didn't give advice, just stroked my head over and over again, the way you stroke a child's head. Until I fell asleep. When I woke up, he was already outside on the lawn.

After I took his picture and saw that he wasn't angry at me for waking him up, I put my camera down and joined him. I hugged him from behind, threaded my hand into the space between his cheek and his sweater and whispered lovers' nonsense. From the angle of his cheek, I could see that he was smiling lazily, and he reached an arm behind him to pull me closer.

On our way back to the world, on the road that wound between the Galilee hills, we started talking about maybe moving in together next year, even though he was still going to school in Tel Aviv and I was still studying in Jerusalem. How can I sleep without you? he said, and I crossed over the valley made by the handbrake that separated us and grabbed hold of his hand. We'd talked about the possibility before, but always in very general, noncommittal terms. Neither of us wanted to suggest it in so many words, as if the one to suggest it first would be responsible for making sure it didn't fail.

*

Moments of flickering doubt in Noa:

When Amir insists on hanging that sad picture – a man who looks like Gérard Depardieu sitting on a bed in a hotel room shadowed in gloom, with something that looks like an old radio next to him looking out at the pale moon – in the middle of the living room. 'It's the only thing in my life that's permanent, the only thing that goes with me to every apartment,' he says, checking to see that it's hanging just so. But that picture makes her feel so low.

And the way he tidies up after her drives her up the wall. Look, she tries to explain to him, without the mess I can't create anything at all. He nods and continues to follow her around and pick up shoes. Socks. White hairbands. Black hairbands.

And there's another unpleasant thing: in the two weeks they've been living together, all the projects she had started for school have stalled. When Amir is in the apartment, she can't concentrate on anything. Her mind is always wandering. It's only in the shower that her thoughts flow freely. Only in the shower do ideas come easily.

So she stays in the shower hour after hour, until the hot water is gone and her fingers are wrinkled like an old lady's or a newborn baby's.

*

Only a plaster wall separates the students from the Zakians. And Moshe put a small hole in it. Why? So the students can stick their hands through it to switch on the water heater, which is in the landlord's house but heats the tenants' water too. So every time Noa and Amir want a hot shower, they first remove the piece of wood that covers the hole in the wall. Then they stick a hand into the home and the lives of the other family, and then withdraw it quickly, as if it had never been there at all. But sometimes (after all, everyone likes to shower at the same time most days), two hands reaching for the switch would graze. And once a week, usually on Thursday, the piece of wood is shoved aside and a Zakian hand drops in letters addressed to 'Amir and Noa – care of the Zakian family.' (I'll set up a mailbox for you, Moshe had told them with a smile, but it'll take a while.)

When he hears the thud of the letters hitting the floor, Amir leaves his books and notebooks and runs to see what has come that day. To see if, along with the mail from the university, there is also a letter from Modi, his best friend – who's so far away.

*

These are hopeful days. In the news, Pilot Pens publishes a picture of the peace agreement signing ceremony, with a close-up of the pen they used. Abu Dhabi is considering renewing its relations with Israel (how we've missed you, Abu Dhabi). There's talk of economic projects, joint agricultural enterprises, cucumber of the courageous. There's a building boom in Gaza. Trees are being planted in Ramallah. An Arab village is offering summer cottages to Jews. Pitta, hummus, *zata'ar*, whatever you want. And believe it or not, they're swamped.

*

Hey m-a-a-a-n, what's happening?

Before anything else, I have to describe the place I'm writing from. It's called Reconcito which translated loosely from Spanish, means hole. And, bro, this is one hell of a hole. To get here, you have to call the owner Alfredo a day in advance from the closest city to set up transportation. Only a jeep can make it through the lousy road that leads from the city to the farm and, of course, Alfredo is the only one who has a jeep. And what does Reconcito have that makes such an operation worth while? Not a hell of a lot. A few horses. A few cows. A small hostel with eight beds. A restaurant that serves two meals a day. And then there's that elusive something that I've no idea what to call, but it's that thing that draws all the tourists to this place. What do I do here? It's like this. From the morning on, I sit on a crooked wooden chair, in the same position, and watch how the same things – the cows, the trees, the clouds – look different all the time. Because of the sun, which moves. Because of my mood. Because of the fact that I'm looking at them for the third time. Sound weird? Sorry, that's how it is when you're in 'trekness' mode. Yes, I've developed (in the course of a single day) a new theory here that says people have three basic modes of consciousness: 'soldieriness', 'civilianness' and 'trekness' which spread out on this kind of axis:

Soldieriness———Civilianness———Trekness

And here's the explanation: remember that feeling you get when you come home from the army and change from your uniform to your pyjamas and, all of a sudden, your body turns limp, all the adrenaline drains out of your chest and the hardness out of your shoulders, and you know that for at least the next forty-eight hours you don't have to be afraid that anyone – the platoon commander, the regimental commander, the military police – might take away your liberty? That's the difference between 'soldieriness' and 'civilianness'. It's that you know no one can tell you what to do. That you and only you decide what to do. Now, pay attention. The difference between 'civilianness' and 'trekness' is the same, but it's internal. Because even after you've given back your uniform and moved on, once and for all, to 'civilianness', you still have to listen to those internal policemen of yours. Still have to act the way people who know you expect you to act. In the 'trekness' mode, through a process that isn't exactly clear to me (remember, this theory is still being developed), you get rid of all of the above one after the other. And your consciousness, at least in theory, remains open to surprises and amenable to changes.

So what do you think, future psychologist? (Before you shoot me down, remember what Zorba the Greek said to the old head monk of the monastery who explained to him the three totally weird theories he'd spent his whole life working on – wait, I don't remember the exact words he used, let me look for it in the book. Here it is, I found it: 'Your theories can save many souls, my Old Father Zorba said to the head monk, and before he lied to him, he thought – and this is where the real beautiful sentence comes – 'Man has another, much greater obligation that is above and beyond the truth.'

I talked to my mother and she told me that you and Noa moved in together. To tell you the truth, I was pretty surprised. The last time we spoke before I left – remember? – after you clobbered me on the tennis (you competitive bastard, couldn't you send me off with a victory?) you said you were afraid it wouldn't work, didn't you? That you had a feeling you'd met her too soon. But it looks like things have worked out for you two since then. So I'm happy for you. Where exactly is the Castel: before Hummus Abu Ghosh or after it? Anyway, I promise to come and visit when I get back (right now, that looks very far away, but who knows).

The sun is setting on Reconcito now, the clouds are painted orange and a light breeze is making the treetops dance. In a little while, when it's completely dark, the fire-flies will start flickering. An amazing sight, a dance of lights. But, except for them, there are no lights here at night, and it's a little hard to keep writing this way (even though it might be interesting to write once at night without seeing what you're writing, without worrying about straight lines and spaces between letters, without thinking about whether you're being understood or not. Maybe I'll try that with my next letter. Poor you).

Meanwhile, *adios*.

Send me something to the Israeli Embassy in La Paz. People tell me they hold letters there.

Regards to Noa.

Modi.

*

Sometimes Amir sees him when he goes outside – the little brother of the soldier who died. In the deserted field between his house and theirs, the boy pets stray cats. Shepherds ants. Builds a monument to his brother, stone on top of stone.

Always alone.

He never looks up and tries to catch Amir's eye, even though he knows he's standing nearby.

*

You can hear everything through these walls, and when I say everything, I mean everything. More power to them, those students, almost every day and sometimes twice a day. And the sounds she makes, oh my God. I mean, not always, sometimes you only hear the bed creaking and the two of them laughing, but every once in a while, when it works for them, she has no shame, that Noa, she lets all the pleasure out, and the funniest thing is that Lilach, my little one, every time she hears Noa enjoying it, she gets scared and starts crying, and I have to pick her up and calm her down, and myself a little bit too, because the truth is, those noises get me all confused. I mean, sometimes it's just annoying and I feel like knocking on their door and telling them to turn down the volume if they don't mind, but sometimes, when Moshe is on the road till late and I'm alone in the house all day with the nappies and the running noses and the radio that plays piano music, then those noises give me a kind of twinge under my stomach and I start looking at the clock, come on, when will Moshe get home, and when he finally does, if the kids are in bed already, I hug him a little longer than usual, and kiss him on the chin, which is a kind of signal we have, and he starts complaining, I'm tired, dead tired, but I know him, my teddy bear, and I know what to do to wake him up: black coffee, a few steamy looks, some rubbing on the back of his neck, and in a few minutes we're in bed, without making noises, but with lots of feeling good, because we've been together for eight years, since high school, and we know what to do and what to say, except that at the end, when it's all over and we're lying on our backs, a little bit apart from each other, Moshe always mumbles, *baruch ha'shem*, thanks be to God, and that annoys

me, so I say why *baruch ha'shem*, what does God have to do with it, because I hate it when he starts talking like his brothers, but no matter how many times I tell him that, he keeps on saying *baruch ha'shem* and claims it just comes out of his mouth automatically.

*

When we were sitting *shivah*, I couldn't wait for it to be over, for all the people to go back to their own houses, especially Aunt Miriam, because she was the reason they moved me into the living room. I wanted us to take the chairs and the mattresses out of the living room, and the piles of dishes, and the half-eaten pieces of *kubeh*, so there'd finally be some space and they'd let me go back to my room and play games on my computer or watch TV, which I couldn't do all week, and I'd have time to think about Gidi and all the new things they said about him last week, some of them really not true, like for instance that he loved the army and all that, but the minute the *shivah* was over and Aunt Miriam, who was the last one to leave, disappeared into the taxi that came to take her to the airport, I was already starting to miss the noise and felt sorry I'd wanted everyone to go, because all of a sudden there was a new kind of quiet in the house that was different from the Saturday morning quiet when everyone is sleeping or the quiet in my class when the teacher tells everyone to read silently from their readers.

Mum and Dad hardly ever talk to me, and if they do, then it's only to tell me what to do – brush your teeth, turn down the sound on the computer – or to ask questions like what do you want in your sandwich or what time should we pick you up after your karate class? What's even weirder is that they hardly ever talk to each other either. And if they do talk, let's say at supper, you can hear in every sentence – even if it's only 'pass me the pepper' – that they're angry.

Dad's angry because of the shrine – that's what he calls it – that Mum is setting up for Gidi in the living room. He doesn't say anything to her, but you can see what he's feeling from the way the muscle in his cheek starts twitching every time she hangs up another picture or lights another candle or frames another one of the letters we got from the army. And Mum is angry at Dad for the things he said to the newspaper. 'Why did he have to do that?' she asked Aunt Margalit on the phone when Dad was at work and I was hiding behind the cabinet, listening. 'I don't understand him. If he has to pour his heart out, let him talk to me. And besides, why does he attack other parents? Where does he get the nerve to judge them?'

This isn't the first time Mum and Dad have been mad at each other.

When Mum wanted to have another baby, two years ago, it was like this. But Gidi still lived at home then. He'd take me to his room and make me fall down laughing with his animal imitations, and then he'd sit me down on his bed and explain to me that it's normal for Mum and Dad to disagree, and it doesn't mean they'll get divorced tomorrow like Roy's parents did, and chances are they'd make up in a week or two and everything would go back to the way it was.

But Gidi's gone now and when I can't take the mood in the house any more, I go straight out to the empty lot without telling anyone first. I jump out the window in my room so Mum won't ask where I'm going, land on the ground with my legs spread, like a gymnast, hop over the fence and go to collect more stones for the monument. Or I play with the cats. No one bothers me with questions. No one looks at me as if I'm a statue in a wax museum, the way the kids in my class have been doing since I went back to school.

Only that tall student who lives in the apartment across the way comes outside sometimes to hang his washing up, or look for the newspapers he thinks are in the bushes. I know that all the newspapers are on the roof, because the guy who delivers them doesn't feel like going all the way to the door, so he throws them from the road and misses, but I don't say anything. Yesterday, after he tripped over

big rock and fell while he was looking, he smiled at me because he felt stupid, and I almost smiled back, but at the last minute I sealed my lips together and pretended I didn't see. I don't need someone else to feel sorry for me.

*

Amir, there's a noise in the living room.

It's the wind.

Maybe it's a thief?

It's the wind, but if you want, I'll go and check.

I want. I love feeling that you're strong and you protect me.

Does that mean I can't be weak with you?

You can, but not too much. Come on.

I'm getting up.

Wait a sec, what do we actually have to steal?

Nothing. Wait, we do. The newspaper.

We still haven't had a single one?

No.

Did you talk to the delivery people?

Yes.

So, maybe Madmoni's workers take them? They get here at six every morning.

Great, Noa, blame the Arabs. It really figures they'd steal *Haaretz*.

Why not? Doesn't it have a property section?

*

That's the house, I'm sure. Or maybe not? For two weeks, ever since we started building the extension here for Madmoni, I've been looking at the house across the street, looking at it a lot. First thing in the morning, I look, and during the breaks, and at the end of the day too, when we're sitting on the pavement waiting for Rami the contractor to pick us up and take us back to the village. The bottom part of the house is new. *Ya'ani*, I mean renovated. Clean stones with thin lines between them. A family with two children lives there – the husband drives for Egged, I can tell from the bus – and there's a young couple living in a little apartment at the back, but all I can see of it is the roof and some aerials.

If there was only that part, at the bottom, I wouldn't think anything.

But upstairs on the second floor where the old man and the old woman come out sometimes, upstairs it's built in the old way, stone on top of stone, the way they used to build in the village. And one stone, in the corner, sticks out like it did in that building, I remember. And another stone, on the left of the door, is as black as the black stone we had, though I remember it being on the right side. And the window has a little arch, just like my parents' window did.

*

My family moved to a lot of different apartments, at least ten before I went into the army. From Jerusalem to Haifa. From Haifa to Jerusalem. From Jerusalem to Detroit. And within each city, too. But no matter how many times we moved, the worst pain I ever felt was the move we made when I was in Year 10. It was during the football World Cup, so I remember the year: '86. Mexico, '86. Belgium against the Soviet Union. Spain against Denmark. Lots of goals. Live broadcasts in the

middle of the night. The time people are sleeping, but I can't fall asleep. From eleven o'clock, I'm tossing and turning in bed trying to decide whether I should finally rebel against this moving from place to place that my father forces on us every few years, whether the time has finally come to stand up and say: enough, I'm staying here. In Jerusalem. With my friends. You can all go back to Haifa. Over and over again, I picture in my mind what's going to happen in the next few weeks. How at the going-away party, the girls will kiss my cheek and all the kids will take my new phone number and promise to stay in touch, how two or three at the most will call during the summer vacation, and we'll see each other maybe once, in Jerusalem, of course, because it's hard to get from there to Haifa, and how, even if we see each other more than once, even if the incredible happens and they do come to Haifa, when school starts we'll drift apart, the letters will get shorter, the silences on the phone will get longer, and the names of all kinds of people I don't know will start coming up in their stories.

Unless – the possibility runs through my mind again – I rent myself a room. Yes. In some old lady's house. There are ads like that in the local papers sometimes. But where will I get the money to rent a room? And where will I do my laundry? And how often can I eat scrambled eggs, which is the only thing I know how to make?

Every night, as the time for the game comes closer, I get up and take my blanket into the living room to watch the game on TV, without sound, so I won't wake everybody up. When there's a goal, I choke back my shouts, and when the broadcast, including the round-up and analysis, is over, I put on my coat and go out into the Jerusalem night, still wound up with the mute suspense of the football game, and walk down to the shopping centre, to the lit-up but closed SuperPharm, where I look at the packages of nappies and toilet paper, read over and over again the posters showing all their special sales until I'm sick of it, and sit down on one of the chairs outside the neighbourhood café, which are tied together with an iron chain. I'm freezing from the cold and think that maybe I should tie myself down with a chain too, like they do in demonstrations, so I won't have to move. I look at the fast-passing cars and make up stories about them: that's a Mossad agent coming back from a spying mission in enemy territory, that's a prostitute coming off her shift ... and only when the first strips of light appear and light up the park, and the rubbish trucks are creaking at the end of the street do I get up from the chair, run all the way home and lie down in bed, pretending to be a good boy. After a little while, I get up and go into the kitchen, drink my morning chocolate milk with Mum as if nothing had happened, and go to school and talk back to all my teachers because I'm too tired to behave myself and because they can't do anything to me anyway. I'm moving to Haifa.

*

There was a strong wind when I took the picture, you can tell from Amir's crest of hair, which has an impressive presence even on normal days, but here it's actually threatening to move out of the frame and from the bushes behind him that are bent strangely towards the right. But what's really interesting about the composition is not the wind but the discrepancy between the figure and the background – between the central event and what's happening behind it. The figure, of course, is Amir, who's holding an oval wooden sign in one hand that says NOA AND AMIR'S HOUSE – you can read it if you strain – against the door. In the other hand, he's holding a big hammer that Moshe the landlord lent him. In a minute, he'll pull some nails out of his pocket and try to hang the sign on the door. At first the nails will bend on him, but after a few tries, he'll manage to do it. Meanwhile, he's smiling a big smile that's a combination of real happiness – it was, after all, an occasion – and a spark of scorn directed at me as if he's asking: why this posing, Noa, why does everything have to be photographed? Behind him, behind the dramatic event, you can see the neglected empty lot between our house and the

house where the bereaved family lives. A crooked iron post, bushes, a small pile of rubbish topped with a huge plastic jerry can, a few boards the contractor forgot to take, small rocks, large rocks, and one mangy cat looking at the camera with glittering eyes. I'd be happy to say that I noticed all those details while I was taking the picture, that I closed the shutter so that everything would be in focus but the truth is, I didn't. Some of the things in the field are blurred, and the ones that aren't, are dimly lit. I forgot again what Ishai Levy, who teaches us the history of photography, told us in our first year: no frame has only one story; always look for other stories around the edges.

After we finished nailing the sign on the door and checked that it was straight, we went inside, pulled down the blinds and celebrated the event in bed. We celebrated everything between the sheets or between the blankets, actually, because it had already started to get pretty cold. We celebrated moving the queen-size mattress into the bedroom. Buying the radiator. Even our first big purchase at the supermarket at the shopping centre (he spread honey on my nipples and then licked it off. Slowly.).

Amir always wants us to stay in bed, hugging each other for ever, but after a few minutes I always want to, have to, escape to the shower.

*

And what was strange was that even when I was standing on my own two feet, even when I had no one else to blame, I kept on moving compulsively. I've lived in seven different apartments since the armistice, seven times boxes, nails, butterflies. If you look at each move separately, you might say I was cursed. The landlord decided to sell the apartment on Hashmoniam Street. Maya decided to fall in love with her lecturer's assistant. My room-mate in Ramat Gan had a nervous breakdown. But the bittersweet truth is – and it took me a while to admit it – that there's something addictive about frequent change, the anticipation, the adrenalin that surges with every new leaf you're about to turn over. I think – we learned this in our first year – that just as people get addicted to the runners' high after jogging, people can get addicted to movers' high or changers' high (the Americans will be sure to find a technical name for it).

I was addicted. Addicted to those muscles that tense up when you're about to leave something. Sometimes I thought I'd never kick it.

And sometimes, I thought that maybe I could, like yesterday, when we hung the sign on the door and then made love, and stayed in bed for hours talking and snuggling while the wind rattled the windows but not us.

*

Moments when Amir is happy that he's Noaandamir:

When they're sitting on the sofa at the end of the day, having a hot drink and telling each other through the steam, about the hurts, the victories, the small moments of loneliness that happened between their lives apart. The conversation flows, every word spoken in its time, and again he remembers: his soul is intertwined with mine. And also: when he comes home late, walking gingerly along the path, sneaking over to the window to peek at her through the slats of the blinds, her face serious and her brow furrowed as she labours over one of her projects. Or: how her lips open slightly when she's watching TV. Or: how her glance wanders sometimes, hanging on an imaginary hook on the ceiling, and though it's clear she's daydreaming, it's not clear what she's feeling. And he also loves: when they watch *The X-Files* together on Tuesday nights. And laugh when Mulder always leaves Scully alone at the worst times. And they jump – chills slithering down their spines like a child down a water slide.

slide – when the music on the soundtrack is scary. Noa presses up against him, so he'll keep the monsters at bay. And he puts his strong, manly arm around her, knowing it's a pose, but enjoying anyway.

*

Sometimes, on Fridays, in the middle of the main street of the Castel, two cars stop window window and the drivers begin a short conversation. What's new, you think Beitar will come out of its slump, when's the baby due? The neighbourhood traffic behind them comes to a standstill. And what Noa likes is that no one even thinks of honking his horn.

Sometimes, on Saturdays, the air carries the sound of a *darbuka* into their house. Distant. Distant. Amir drums the rhythm on his statistics book. Noa takes her clothes off and dances for him.

And a small prophet dances with them for a while, swaying his bald head and smiling a crooked, devious smile.

*

There's a new CD in Noa and Amir's house: *I'm Your Fan*. New renditions of Leonard Cohen songs, sung by many different singers. But a thread of dark magic runs through each and every one, and it lingers. Amir's favourite is 'Hallelujah', the last track. '*Love is not a victory march, it's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah.*' Noa's favourite is track number six, a French song that fills her with a kind of pleasant tension, even though the language is beyond her comprehension. Sometimes, in the morning, when they can only listen to one song because they have to get going they argue about which of the two to play. On the other side of the wall, in the Zakian home, there's not a single angry voice. Moshe is on the road and Sima is totally free to listen to the music of her choice. Her CD of the month: *Caramel, Bonbon et Chocolat*, a collection of French love songs that she listens to a lot. Sima learned French at home; her mother, may she rest in peace, taught her when she was very young. 'French is the language of beauty,' she'd say, and she made Sima practise till the words flowed off her tongue. Her mother also taught her that God is first of all in your heart, and all the rest – the interpretations, the rules, the regulations – is just window dressing. And a father who leaves his daughters has no God in his heart, even if he obeys all the commandments and recites every blessing. When Sima hears Nino Ferrer, she dreams of slim French men with well-trimmed moustaches and remembers her mother sweeping the kitchen floor in their apartment in the Ashkelon housing project, dancing with the broom, only her black hair swaying in the small room.

In the house of mourning, there is no music now. No one banned it in so many words, but, right after the funeral, the house became shrouded in silence somehow. Sometimes, when Yotam's father feels like he can't take it any more, he goes down to his car, sits inside and closes the door. Then he tunes the radio to a talk show, but not because he's interested in what people have to say. He hopes that the soothing sound of other human voices will make the pain go away. Sometimes, when Yotam's mother feels she can't take it any more, she turns on the small kitchen radio with the volume down low. She listens to a single song and turns it off right away so no one will know.

When Yotam feels he can't take it any more, he goes out to the empty lot.

*

Finally, I called the boy to come over. I asked him if he knew where our newspapers were disappearing to. He pointed to the asbestos roof. From where I was standing, I couldn't see what was on it, so I made a questioning gesture with my hand. He signalled me to follow him. We climbed over

the stones, careful of potholes, till we reached a small rise in the middle of the field between the houses. We climbed it and, from the top, we could see on to the roof. Dozens of neglected rolled-up newspapers lay on it. The delivery boy must have been too lazy to go all the way to the door and instead, tried his luck at newspaper-throwing. Thanks, I said to the kid, and he answered politely, you're welcome, and with shoulders stooped he turned to go back to what he'd been doing. Hey, kid . I called. I wanted to keep him from leaving. There was something about him, about his dejected look about those sharply creased pants, the shirt with the sleeves that were too long, the shoes with their bright white tongues, the way he always stroked the cats – something that touched my heart. Besides, I didn't feel like going back to statistics. What's your name? I asked him. Yotam, he answered. Nice to meet you, my name's Amir, I said and held out my hand. He extended his small hand, gave mine a brief shake and pulled it back quickly. What now, I thought. How do we go on from here? Wanna play? I heard myself say. He gave me a quick look, checked out my height and said, play what? He was right. Play what? After all, we were fifteen years apart in age. I tried to think of something before he took off, but all the games that came into my mind were old ones that had passed their sell-by dates. Atari, Scrabble, Monopoly. Like that.

A rusty iron pole sticking up from the ground caught my eye. I remembered that when we went on our trips, my father and I used to play at throwing stones at a target. Let's see who hits that pole first, he said. All right, he agreed, picked up a stone and threw it. There was a metallic sound. Bull's-eye. OK, I thought, I'm dealing with a pro here.

Let's see who hits the Coke can first, I said.

Where?

There, next to the skip.

And that's how the game developed. From the Coke can we moved on to the plastic water bottle, then from the water bottle to a large rock that was further away. Till suddenly, without warning, he said, bye, I have to go, and started running back to his house. I called after him, bye Yotam, but he didn't turn around. He probably didn't like the game, I thought to myself. OK, and his partner was a little too old for him.

The next day, when Noa was at college, he showed up at my door. With a backgammon set in his hand.

*

We're on a break now. They let us have one a day. Half an hour. If we take more, Rami yells and takes it off our pay. And we get paid almost nothing anyway. Jabber takes out the pitta, Nayim takes out the *labeneh*. Najib and Amin take out some vegetables and start cutting up a salad. They don't let me do anything because I'm older. Sheikh Saddiq they call me sometimes, to make me mad, even though I'm faster and better at my work than all the younger ones. With me, there are no surprises. When it comes to measuring, I'm never even a millimetre off. When it comes to pouring cement, I check all the timbers and joists ten times. Here, Nayim passes me a piece of pitta and the plastic container of *labeneh*. *Shukran* I say, thank you, and my mouth fills up with spit even before I dip the pitta into the *labeneh*. They make Nayim's *labeneh* from goat's milk in his village, and it's famous in all the other villages. There's no *labeneh* like it, not even in the most expensive restaurants – sour and soft, like it should be. I taste some and pass it to Ramzi. He's busy arguing with Samir about the difference between Jewish girls and Arab girls. Our girls are a lot more exciting, Samir says. With them, there's room for imagination, not like with the Jewish girls who walk around half naked. Amin doesn't think so. Nayim and Jabber put in their two pence. I've already heard those discussions about girls a thousand times.

and know all the different opinions by heart, so I move away a little bit and lean against the wall at an angle that lets me see the house. Even after a month, I still haven't made up my mind about it.

I'd forgotten about that house for years. I was four when they threw us out, or maybe five, I don't know. When we ran away, they left behind the jug my birth certificate was in. For all the years since then, I forgot everything, and it was in prison, of all places, that I remembered. I wasn't inside for a long time, only six months. I'm not an Intifada hero, not the chief of a fighting unit, all I did was 'assist in terrorist activity', and it wasn't even on purpose. I gave a lift in my car to someone who wanted to stab a soldier at the gates to the military government office, and I didn't even know he had a big knife under his coat or that the Secret Service was on to him already and waiting for him there. Not that they believed me when they questioned me. Why should they believe an Arab? They slapped me. Shook me. Twisted my arm and then every finger separately. But they didn't have any proof, and they caught him before he stabbed anyone, so they only gave me six months. I got off cheap, like the saying. But those six months, *wa'alla*, like a hundred years for me – those thoughts about my wife and my sons, and the time, the time that never passes when you're in prison. Even though they have roll call in the morning and roll call in the afternoon, and even though I took two Hebrew lessons a day from the famous Mustafa A'alem, who was in for twenty years and knew Hebrew better than the Jews, even so, the time didn't pass.

You're lying there on your bed at night, you can't fall asleep because of the fleas and the snoring and the air stinks so much you can't breathe, and because there's nothing to do, you start imagining things. You see *jinim*, *ya'ani* demons, walking around the room, you hear voices talking into your ear and when the night's over and you're sure you're *majnun*, completely crazy, and you're so scared that you feel like crying, all of a sudden you start to remember things you didn't even know you had: your head, the face of a boy who was your friend, a slap your father once gave you, and that house, the house you left. Like from inside the smoke of a *nargileh*, the rooms float up one by one, the small kitchen that was always full of pots, the bathroom with the door so low that Papa had to bend his head to go through it, the small step you had to walk down in order to go into the living room, the three mattresses on the floor, Monir's, yours and Marwan's, no, first yours, then Monir's and then Marwan's, the floor tiles that had drawings on them, the broken tile in the right-hand corner, the heavy door that creaked a little when it closed, the yard where you and your brothers used to play, and the window with the arch that looks so much like the window of the house I'm looking at now. The house that belongs to that family whose name I still don't know.

Yesterday, on my break, I went to see what the name on the door was. A young woman with eyes like a tiger came out from downstairs and asked, can I help you? I was flustered, I didn't know what to say, so I asked if I could have some water, and she asked, are you Madmoni's worker? I said yes, and she said, so why doesn't he give you water? But she went inside anyway and came out with a bottle and I said thank you. I didn't know what to do with my eyes, so I kept them on my shoes, on the spot of plaster, then I turned around and walked towards Madmoni, and I even drank from the bottle while I walked, even though I wasn't thirsty, so she wouldn't think I lied, but I don't think she saw because she heard the door slam shut.

Yallah ya sheikh, back to work. Amin stopped the thoughts that kept spinning around in my brain like a cement mixer. He stood above me and held out his hand. I got up on my own. I'm no old man, you have to help up.

*

She's a good person, that Noa, really, that's for sure. Yesterday, I had to go to Doga to get nappies and

I didn't want to leave the children alone, so I knocked on their door and she opened it wearing white pyjamas with little sheep on them – probably so there'd be something to count at night when they can't fall asleep – and she said right away that she'd look after them, even though I saw from the open book in the living room that she was in the middle of something. All she said was, I'm warning you Sima, I'm not too good with children, and I said, well then, sweetie, this is your chance to practice with other people's kids before you have your own, and she laughed with her whole body – all the sheep moved – and said, it'll be a long time before that happens, and I said, why, how old are you then you talk like that, and she said, twenty-six, I mean soon, my birthday's in another month, and I said, isn't that funny, I'm twenty-six too, and she opened her eyes wide and said, no, you're joking, and I pretended to be insulted on purpose and said, why, do I look that old? She blushed, poor thing, and started to stammer, no, of course not, I just thought, you know, because of the children, of course not Sima, you look terrific, even Amir says so, and I said thank you, and posed like a model. I lifted my head and pulled my hair back with that gesture Moshe likes so much, and the sheep moved again, and then it was quiet while we made our comparisons in our mind. I think she felt sorry for me, I'm not sure, but I felt a bit bad then for not putting on make-up in the morning. Anyway, I finally said, get yourself together, sweetie, I'll wait for you, and she said, I'll be there in fifteen minutes, just let me have a shower.

While I was waiting for her, I peeled an orange for Liron and thought: there's no reason to feel sorry for me. It's true that I don't go to university every day, and I don't wear beautiful skirts like she does (those legs of hers, like a model's). It's true that I don't meet any gorgeous men and I don't sit in cafés or walk around with a fancy camera that costs at least ten thousand shekels (that's what Moshe says), but none of that stuff is worth one minute with the children, like yesterday when Lilach did research on my thumb, looked at it, pulled it, put it in her mouth. Then she moved over to my little finger. I had a laughing fit about how thorough she was. Or when Liron says to me a week ago, his face so serious, Mummy, you're more beautiful than all the other girls, when I grow up I want to marry you. Can anything compare to that? And besides, I will go back to college. Moshe and I have talked about it already. After they grow up a little. I'll finish my degree and work in my field like a real career woman. Where's the fire? Like they say, good things come to those who wait. That's what I was thinking while I fed Liron the peeled orange. Lilach started whining. It's always like that. Every time he gets something, she cries. Even if she doesn't really want it. I tickled the bottom of her foot to calm her down and reached out to the bowl of oranges with the other, but then I heard steps outside and I thought it was Noa. I put the orange on the table and got up to open the door.

An Arab worker, one of Madmoni's, was climbing the stairs that go up to Avram and Gina. Excuse me, are you looking for someone? I asked. He started to um and ah. No, I mean yes, I mean no. I thought I'd caught him red-handed. But doing what, I didn't know. All of a sudden he asked for water. Water? Doesn't Madmoni give you water? No, he doesn't. I filled a bottle and gave it to him. Liron was peeping out from behind me, scared to death. Lilach kept on crying, want orange, want orange. The worker's eyes were glued to his shoes. His face was red. Maybe from embarrassment, maybe from the sun, I don't know. He took the bottle and said, thank you very much. And left.

When Noa came, I told her what happened. I should report it to the police, I said. Who knows what that man is and what he's up to. Calm down, Noa said, he was just thirsty. But who can guarantee that he won't come back? I asked, and took Lilach out of the crib and held her close to my breast. Now she was really crying. Screaming. I don't like it, Noa, an Arab wandering around outside. What if he wants to kidnap my Lilach? Noa gently stroked Lilach's soft, downy hair. With two fingers. Back and forth. In Noa's honour, the little girl opened her green eyes (not from me, that amazing colour is from

Moshe's side) and gradually stopped crying. See, I told you, why did you say you're not good with kids? Well, it's not hard with Lilach, she's special, Noa said, and I felt the pride swelling up inside me, even though I knew she was trying to be nice. OK, Sima, she said and put a hand on my shoulder. You can go to Doga now. But what about the ... I started to object. It's all right, I won't open the door to anyone, she interrupted me and looked at her watch. Go on. They're closing soon.

I took my bag and went. Outside, I looked at Madmoni's workers and tried to find the one who asked me for water. He wasn't there. There were only two younger ones laying bricks and giving me hungry, creepy looks. I pretended to ignore them and walked a little faster.

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They warned us about it in the first lesson of the semester. The lecturer bent over the microphone and said: There is a well-known phenomenon among students studying psychopathology. They tend to think that they are suffering from some of the mental diseases they are learning about. This happens all over the world, so don't be frightened, OK? That's what she said into the microphone, and the class responded with peals of laughter that rolled from the first rows all the way to the back of the hall. Ugh. Frightened?!

And now, in the morning, the house is empty. The sounds of drilling from Madmoni's direction come through the silence in random bursts. I'm sitting in front of *Abnormal Psychology* by Rosenman and Zeligman, third edition, and it's happening to me. Just like she said. Obsessive compulsive? Of course. Yesterday I came back twice to check that I hadn't left the gas on. And once to check that I locked the top bolt on the door. Phobic? Absolutely. What else would you call my fear of dogs, which started after a German Shepherd bit me in Haifa when I was nine, and only gets worse with time? An anxiety, what about anxiety? A person only needs six of the ten symptoms of chronic anxiety, Rosenman and Zeligman write, to be classified as pathological. With fear and trembling, I count how many symptoms I have, trying not to cheat myself the way I did back when I answered the 'Test Yourself' questions in Maariv's *Teen Magazine*, and count three. Because my heart's pounding while I'm counting, I add 'rapid pulse'. The total: four.

Two more, just two more, and I cross the thin line. Then nothing will differentiate me from the Helping Hand Club in Ramat Chen. In another two weeks, I'm supposed to start volunteering there. They say it improves your chances of being accepted into a Master's degree programme. This isn't a hospital, Nava the co-ordinator explained to me in the preliminary conversation we had yesterday at the mouldy shelter. (Why do they put them in a shelter? I thought to myself as I walked down the stairs. To protect them from the world or to hide them from it?) This is a social club, she said. People come here after being released from psychiatric hospitals. Most of them are on medication, some live with their families and some in protected housing. Our job is not to save them or to restore them to sanity, but to help them pass their time in the club pleasantly. That's why we prefer to call them 'members' and not 'patients', even though the therapeutic value of this place is clear. While she was speaking, I thought to myself, why is it so neglected here? Her words are nice, but the walls are cracked, the steps stink of urine, and the pictures someone drew with a marker on pieces of A4 paper are all hanging crooked. What's the big deal about straightening them? You have no idea how much the members are looking forward to your coming, she interrupted my thoughts: they're actually counting the days. I nodded at her in understanding, looked bravely into her eyes, and suddenly wanted very much to get up, just to get up and run out of that shelter into the open air, into the sunlight. I actually felt my leg muscles tighten so I could stand up, but at the last minute I stopped myself and said to her: Thursdays are most convenient for me.

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