The Town Below / Hila Amit

Prologue & Chapter 1

Prologue

Mariam considers the three of them, the two men and her little girl: the man she chose, her daughter – how had there ever been a world without her? – and Eliad, the man who had stumbled into her life through Ibrahim as if by drunken accident, a fractured foreign body lodged in the family tissue, hopelessly stuck.

The weather is perfect, neither hot nor cold. The grass is green and unvarying, no bald spots. Nice and dry. If she lets herself fall to the ground her clothes won't get wet, she won't get dirty. But she remains standing. Mariam watches them, observing, admiring the arrangement: Ibrahim and Layla in the sandbox, at the only playground that still has sand – and without that modern, multi-colored rubber surface – an old-fashioned playground, like the one she and Daana used to play on. He's talking to Layla, who is smiling, squealing with laughter, wiggling her fingers in the sand.

He's not dressed for summer, Ibrahim, or for Haifa for that matter – not for the Hadar neighborhood anyway – every inch of him gives off a glow of luxury that sticks out in her stomping grounds; she loses track of which of his outfits she's already seen, everything always looks new on him, polished, those shoes, and it's all brand names, all of it, the sunglasses, the iPhone, he's swimming in a sea of cash while she's standing in the shallow

puddles of social services. That's another reason she chose him, the promise of income; with her paltry part-time employment she couldn't have afforded any of the things she so desperately wants for Layla, not even her afterschool activities, let alone the private education.

He dresses Eliad too, she's seen it, the process, how he showers him with gifts, how Eliad keeps looking better all the time, more put-together, organized, even though his face still reflects the disintegration, the disregard, all the clothes in the world can't hide it, one look in his eyes and it's plain to see. And yet, there are moments – like this one right here, him pulling funny faces at Layla from the bench, laughing with her – when you could buy into it, could imagine him bursting with energy, full of life.

Her mother is on her way over, to Binyamin Park, in Hadar, the only park in the area. In the Halisa neighborhood there's only one small playground, in the school yard. When she and Daana were little they spent most of their time playing in the decrepit alleyways between the buildings; behind the mosque, among the trees, in the streets that stretched for miles devoid of purpose and sidewalks, ending at the wadis that have since been paved over with real roads but which back then were only chasms filled with busted green cactuses; they'd pick prickly pear with their father's work gloves, minding the thorns, and bring them to Sobhiya, who'd slice the sweet fruit for them. Playing outside their house they'd look out at the bay of the blue sea, imagining a different life for themselves, dreaming up castles on the chalky, rocky soil littered with garbage. And now, with Layla, she recalls the long afternoons the three of them spent together far from home, roaming their side of the city, wandering in constant pursuit of shade, playgrounds, benches their mother would then collapse on, sapped; but instead of going home, she would prod them to stay out just a bit longer, until

sunset, until it was time to return and make dinner, to return to their small house, a squat white cube.

Somehow her mother is scaling her way from Halisa up to Binyamin Park on foot, won't hear of a taxi. They haven't told her yet. *Yet*, she thinks, while the possibility of such a moment moves further and further away from her, out of reach. She thinks about it often, when she looks at Ibrahim and Layla together, and also when she falls asleep, alone, in bed: how could she do such a thing to her? How could she destroy the image her mother has of them, of the good, normal family her daughter brought into being? Not like her sister, Daana – the battered divorcée, the daughter who moved back in with her and would never again move out; she, the youngest, who married a successful man, a provider, and gave her a sweet-sweet granddaughter. How could she take that away from her?

And it seems that Ibrahim is also slipping further away from that possibility, from telling his own parents, it seems that this reality is taking root around them, thick and dense. They haven't talked about it for months, and perhaps the only one who's still expecting it to happen, still waiting, is Eliad. Eliad, who wouldn't demand a thing from them, who would stay, no matter what. It had all worked out so well – was nearly perfect, what they had created for themselves. What more could she possibly want, after writing an all-encompassing, multigenerational, enviable family narrative?

Here comes Layla, picking herself up from the sandbox, here she comes, crawling towards her, her clothes fraying at the knees, dirtied, but her beautiful daughter doesn't care. Eliad gets up and follows her precocious daughter, watching her, on the lookout for kids on scooters or bikes that might put her in harm's way; and now Ibrahim is standing up, giving Mariam a quick smile before casting another look at Layla, who pauses, fixing her eyes on a

plump red ant, trying to catch it between her fingers, then hears something, cranes her small neck, her big eyes stretching wide. Such joy Layla has brought into their lives, now, when her sister's twins were already big, already in high school, after everything had fallen apart and was put back together again, and she suddenly remembers how the twins used to play with them as toddlers in the backyard of the house in Arraba – back when the two men, Wassim and her father, were still in the picture, still among them – and her mother, who despite her knees and her back sat there on the floor beside her granddaughters, how she glowed.

And here comes her mother, appearing from between the trees, climbing the last few steps between them, plastering a kiss on Mariam's forehead, bringing a tissue to her face and wiping the sweat from the road, from Hadar's hilly streets; she picks Layla up, groaning with effort, plants a sticky kiss on both her cheeks, carries her over to Ibrahim, hugs and kisses him, then turns to Eliad and asks, in Hebrew, how are you, and gives him a kiss too, accepting his perpetual presence as if it wasn't odd in the least.

She must already know, her mother – Mariam thinks – she knows and refuses to let the story out, preferring this sheltering charade, this promise of competency and propriety, of an uncluttered routine. Perhaps her older sister's divorce was all her mother could take, the big secret about Wassim and Daana. Perhaps she prefers this normalcy, even if it's staged – after a lifetime of painful pretending with Mariam's father, her mother is no stranger to putting on a show.

When the sun disappears they head back to the house. These days her mother can barely make it up the three floors. Ibrahim ascends with Layla on his hip, taking two stairs at a time, his long legs limber as if nothing could ever tire them, while she, her mother and Eliad follow him up slowly, step by step, panting by the last landing.

She considers Eliad, a few steps ahead of her, his body recoiling in pain, his legs barely complying. His disease is like another member of the household, a teenager prone to unexpected outbursts. Her mother is the last one up the stairs; the door is already open, the house laid bare but inviting, Layla on the living room carpet playing with one of the countless toys Ibrahim's parents keep buying her – a new box with every visit, wooden toys, shiny board books ordered from abroad and which probably cost more than she cares to consider – and Ibrahim is already making everyone tea in her kitchen, his kitchen, and even Eliad is joining them. Instead of saying goodbye at the door and turning to his and Ibrahim's apartment across the hall, he walks in and plops himself onto the couch, looking worn out, depleted. But her mother doesn't see all this. All she sees is her new granddaughter, beaming with joy. And her mother seems so calm and happy that Mariam can't risk it, she just can't, not when it's all going so smoothly, a faultless performance down to the last detail – they even hung Ibrahim's old clothes in the bedroom closet, for her mother's occasional cleaning frenzies. They do his laundry there too, as if he still lives with them.

And he does lives there, he's there isn't he? Every day, all the time; that division they'd once worked out, divvying up the days between them, remained elusive, neither of them willing to give up a single moment with Layla. And then there's Eliad, seeping into this existence of theirs until he can take no more and crosses the narrow hallway, disappearing from view; Ibrahim joins him, and they hole up in their apartment until morning comes, until Ibrahim leaves the sleeping Eliad behind and slips back in without even knocking, to take Layla from her and stretch out next to her on the couch, as on the day Layla came into their lives, the day Mariam gave birth.

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He stood by the car with a box cutter, scraping into the paint. The car's metal shell was hard and hot, and the sun blinding. He didn't even know what time it was. All he knew was that he had woken up to this mess and now had to fix it as best he could. He turned the F into a ladder, stretching the lines. Concentrating, he then ran the blade from top to bottom, crossing out the A, both Gs, the O and finally the T, but that wasn't enough, he had to etch more lines diagonally, and from left to right, working his fingers to the bone even though he knew it wouldn't change a thing, the word hiding underneath would still be visible, also to his parents, who would see it every time they looked at the car, see what had been keyed onto it, no matter how many lines he layered, in the blazing sun, barely awake, exhausted.

He lingered so he wouldn't have to go back inside and see their disgusted expressions, especially his mother's, which had changed all at once from what it had always been, even only the day before, when he returned from the base to a heaping bowl of stew. She had stood behind him for a brief second and kissed the top of his head – he felt her hair brushing against the back of his neck, against his shoulders that were aching from the weapon slung across them, and the weight of his heavy duffle bag, and from pulling kitchen duty, scrubbing and scouring greasy pots almost as big as himself, scrubbing and scouring – before sitting down next to him and watching him eat. But this morning the look, the touch, they had vanished, and from this moment on she would only regard him with black, empty eyes. Or worse: not look at him at all.

He didn't check how much it would cost to replace the door, it wouldn't have made sense. The metal was dented, the paint faded, electrical tape held one of the tail lights in place – the entire car was a grim relic of its glory days under its previous owner. The scratches he made blended in with the general neglect. He didn't look into how much the repair would cost not only because the car was old and busted, but because he knew he wouldn't be able to afford it, no matter what the price, not on a soldier's salary. And even if he could, how exactly would he get the car all the way to one of the mechanics downtown without the whole neighborhood seeing that shocking, ghastly word etched onto the door?

He was just about finished. It was now nearly impossible to make out the word concealed underneath the crisscrossed scratches, the lacerations in the metal flesh, in his flesh. Still holding the box cutter he had found in one of his father's drawers, hand shaking, he was finished but didn't know what to do next – how could he go back inside, how could he face them? He hadn't even had coffee yet when his father knocked on his bedroom door, furious, dragged him outside to the garage, silently pointed at the car and fixed him with a hard, agitated glare, after which they both went back inside to the living room where his mother stood waiting, and his parents looked at him without a word, and he should have done the same – should have kept his mouth shut, and if he absolutely had to open it then it should have been to lie, express his fury, swear, show them that he was just as angry and appalled by that word as they were. He didn't know what had gotten into him, to stand there the way he did and say yes, it's true; what was he thinking when he decided then and there to confess, spontaneously, when he knew it could have gone a million ways, his father could have smacked him, they could have thrown his things out, locked him in his room for who

knows how long, maybe until he promised to take care of it, seek treatment, call his military commander and ask for a referral to a psychiatric hospital, to get this demon out of him.

But they didn't do any of the things he imagined, instead they just looked away and fell silent, and he couldn't take it anymore, that silence that spread through the room like mustard gas, that disregard of what he said, of his very being, and he lowered his gaze and held out for as long as could before the tears clogged his throat, and then, so as not to fall apart in front of them, he went and rifled through the drawers in the hallway, searching for something strong and steely; and his eyes latched onto the box cutter. He picked it up and went out to the car. Loaded for bear, he forgot that he was tired, that his shoulders ached, that he hadn't had his coffee yet, hadn't eaten a thing, and as he worked to obliterate the word, there was only one thought on his mind – the nightclub on Lilienblum Street where he had spent the previous evening, and the man who had pulled him into the bathroom, whose muscular arms had pinned him against the cold, black ceramic tiles, drained him, and after which he returned to Matan, smiling but exhausted, ready to go home, but in the end had another drink, and danced some more, and waited until Matan was also ready to head back, until he had his own visit to the bathroom. It was only at three in the morning – after a Coke and a bottle of water and waiting a sobering hour from his last drink – that they drove back to Kfar Saba, and not for a moment did it occur to him to check the car. He didn't know when that word had been keyed onto the driver's door, whether it had happened in Tel Aviv, outside the club, or in his neighborhood, after they got back—or maybe this very morning, while he was still in bed, taking his time waking up to what should have been a restful, laid back Saturday.

When he finally reemerged, they were no longer in the living room, it wasn't even noon and his parents had withdrawn into their bedroom. Taking the hint, he went to his room, threw something on, headed back out to the car and left the neighborhood with no particular destination in mind. As he drove downtown the bleakest images flitted before his eyes, of his life from that moment forward, of long Saturdays on the base without visitors, without his mother's food; he saw himself staying on the base during every holiday for the next two years that remained of his service, saw himself on his discharge day, alone, without anyone waiting for him at the gates, and while taking in this montage – his eyes a projector, casting these images from his brain onto the windshield of his car – he was surprised he didn't get into an accident, didn't swerve into the next lane. With crushing resignation and the acceptance of this harrowing future weighing down on him, he fought to keep his thoughts on the present, and parked outside Matan's house. Glancing at his phone, he wondered whether to text or call, or get out and buzz the intercom to his parents' apartment, interrupting them on a Saturday afternoon.

When Matan finally came out Eliad walked him around the car and led him to the driver's door. Matan looked and said, "my god". They both got in, sighing, and sat in silence for a few long moments while Eliad let his mind go blank and his body sink into the seat, trying to rid himself of all sensation, to liquidize and pool onto the floor mat where his feet were resting, and slowly seep out onto the road, evaporating upon contact with the scorching asphalt, becoming air, dematerializing.

"Do you want to spend the night?" Matan asked, and Eliad shook his head, "no, I have to head back to the base first thing tomorrow morning, they didn't tell me to leave, they just

stopped talking to me", he said and felt his throat tightening as he recalled his mother's eyes, and fell silent again, and wanted to cry, but not there, not in front of Matan.

"Hey, let's go to the beach, let's get out of this shithole", Matan suggested, and Eliad nodded.

They pulled into a small, packed parking lot and walked down the narrow slope that led to the beach. Sweating, Eliad felt grimy because he hadn't showered after the club last night, crawling straight into bed instead, and in the morning he couldn't stick around the house, not even for a shower, so the moment they found a spot on the beach Eliad took off his clothes and said to Matan, "come on, let's hit the water".

"Patience, man, we just got here", Matan said and spread a blanket across the sand, sat down, but Eliad couldn't wait and he ran over to the water in his underwear, submerged his entire body, let the cool water wash over every inch of him. Then he returned to the small stretch of sand Matan had found them and lay on his back beside him, looking at the sky through his big black sunglasses, trying to calm down, to clear his head.

He didn't say anything for the longest time until Matan finally broke the silence and offered, "come on", and they got up and ran to the water, to the small, placid waves. They went far out, where there were no other people, then swam back to shore and stood up, their backs to the waves.

"What am I going to do?" Eliad said, gazing out at the beach.

"I don't know, maybe they'll get over it, the shock, maybe by the time you get back they'll have calmed down", Matan said without looking at him. But Eliad didn't want to go

back, didn't want to return home to find out whether or not they'd calmed down, whether or not they were speaking to him.

They stayed at the beach for a few good hours, until sunset, then silently picked up their belongings, climbed up to the parking lot and drove back to Kfar Saba, to Matan's house, where they sat in his room playing some stupid video game, Eliad trying to put off returning home for as long as possible, but he was also getting tired, and knew he had to get up early the next morning, to head back to the base, so eventually, at some point, he told Matan, "I'm going! See you later, alligator!" and Matan laughed, and said "talk to me tomorrow, call me from the base", and walked him to the door. Eliad nodded and returned to his cursed car. He had no idea what awaited him back home, whether they'd be there, in the living room, parked in front of the TV, watching another bus attack on the news. They weren't. The lights were out and the house was still when he walked in. He made a beeline to the bathroom, took a shower and brushed his teeth, set his alarm, crawled into his small bed and burrowed under the covers, and fell asleep.

He woke up the next morning, put on the uniform his mother had washed for him on Friday, before she knew how her youngest son spent his nights, and slipped out quietly, without having coffee or a bite to eat, without the box of cookies his mother used to bake for him to take back to the base, and instead of having his father drive him there as always, he took the bus that ran the length of sleepy Weitzman Street, its shops still closed. And on the bus, feeling the sting of yesterday's choked-back tears, he pressed his face against the window and looked out – lowering his sunglasses even though there wasn't much sun outside – and finally let the tears flow, the view out the window blurring by.

A week later, as he made his way home from the base, anxiety spread through his limbs in the form of fatigue, and the ride from the bus stop to his house seemed endless; he felt as if he was barely moving, weighed down by the heft of his bag, his life and his car – which suddenly came into view, gleaming in the sun.

Everything looked normal: his mother in the kitchen, standing over the pots, a typical image from his childhood. He realized then and there how deeply he had come to rely on just this – his mother, at home, making them food, no matter what happened outside, out in the world, their small family enclave unshakable. Until last week. And what will happen now, the thought hit him at full pelt, as if the ground beneath him had given way and he was falling into a deep abyss, and he stared dizzily at the table set for lunch, and turned his gaze back to his mother, who returned the look and said hello without approaching him – without the usual hug or kiss – and he went to his room, shocked, not knowing what to make of this new reality, and put his bag on the floor and, following his regular Shabbat routine, took out his clothes to put in the wash.

He carried the pile of dirty laundry to the bathroom and loaded the ancient machine, feeling the last of his energy draining away as he stood there not knowing where to put the detergent or what button to press. Stepping out into the hallway he almost shouted, Mom, but choked and returned to the bathroom, sat down on the toilet seat and took three deep breaths before lifting himself back up, pouring detergent into one of the three compartments that popped open in front of him, randomly, and turning the dial to the symbol that seemed to make the most sense, hoping he wouldn't break the machine, wouldn't ruin yet another

thing in the house. When he stepped back out into the hallway he heard his mother calling him, went to the kitchen and sat down in front of her. The silence slithered between them for a long moment, and when he looked up he saw the tears in her eyes, the mascara running in black streams, dirtying her face.

"I haven't slept in a week, Eliad", she said, her gaze wavering between him and the table top. A tremor shot through him and he lowered his eyes as she continued, almost accusingly: "I can't stop crying". She tried to get him to look at her, wanted him to see her tears, and boring into him she pressed on – "my whole body aches, my arthritis has flared up again". She pointed at the dressing that looped around her right hand, something he hadn't seen for a long time.

Steadfast in his silence he began to feel beads of sweat forming on his skin, to feel how intensely hot it was in the kitchen, with the pots on the stove and the oven releasing clouds of sweltering steam, and he wanted to get up but couldn't move a single one of his limbs, wanted to respond – to shove a good answer in her face, one that would shift the balance of power around the kitchen table – but he was paralyzed, appalled by his weakness, terrified of what was to come.

"Your father too, couldn't sleep all week".

Eliad didn't know what to say. He felt last week's tears crawling back up his throat and wondered whether he should let her see him like this, crying, whether it would elicit compassion or only more disdain, or reinforce what she was probably already thinking – my queer son, a sissy, fairy – or perhaps present her with an opportunity to hug him, to see him for who he was. A picture from a family photo album flitted through his mind: him sitting on the desert soil, his face red and bloated with tears, big colorful hot air balloons in the

background, and his mother in a yellow dress, bending over him, hugging him. A desire for such a hug suddenly burned in his bones, so overwhelming that his face flushed and his body shook, but he didn't cry or answer or react in any way because he didn't know how, and eventually she stood up, and without saying a word turned off the oven, lowered the heat under the pots and stood there by the stove, perfectly still, and they waited for his father to come back, waited to eat, in silence.

He wanted to get up but felt pinned to his chair, to the table, bound, and his mind flashed back to the first time he heard his parents bring up the subject. He was in the eighth or ninth grade, and Dana International was being interviewed about her upcoming performance in the Eurovision contest. He remembered his mother sitting in front of the TV, how she turned her head and made a spitting sound, saying, disgusting, how could they send that *thing* to represent our country, how? And he sat next to her, pale, and tried to ignore his mother, what she had just said about the woman on TV, who only a moment earlier had made him feel a special throb. He also remembered how that woman took to the stage after being declared the winner, holding that giant trophy, and his horrified father said well ain't that just fine and dandy, now we'll get trannies from all over flying in, and Eliad fell silent, making himself as small as possible on their old, sunken couch, burrowing under the blanket. He remembered wanting to get up and walk out, catch a ride to Tel Aviv and join the masses crowding at Rabin Square in celebration, jump into the fountain with them, dance, stay there and never look back. But he didn't say a word. Just sat by his parents on the couch, silently. And went to school the next day, his mouth still shut. Who watched Eurovision, who? Only fags.

In that moment, at the kitchen table, his mother looked just as she had back then, in front of the TV, watching the broadcast that set the rules for his very existence, what he was allowed to say and do and what he wasn't – how could he have forgotten? But only a week ago he had, and broken the rules, and now he was rooted to the spot, unable to speak even though he wanted to share with her everything he had been through from seventh grade up until the army, how he had experienced his childhood as a sort of spy behind enemy lines, a foreign agent sent on a mission: to survive – survive amidst this group of boys he had grown up with from elementary school all the way to high school, the neighborhood boys; a mission to survive this reality that had hemmed him in from all sides for as long as he could remember, following him into the military, as a private serving on an antiaircraft base. He was always surrounded by boys who talked about nothing but girls, who made crude comments he couldn't relate to, like check out the rack on that one, or, I'd tap that ass. He always felt pressured to participate in this ritual, to contribute an obscene remark of his own, trying to sound convincing when in reality he was terrified – of getting a sudden hard-on around these neighborhood boys, of his high school friends picking up a vibe, of his army buddies sensing there was something different about him. 'Faggot' was the most common cuss word in the school corridors, in the cafeteria, on the base.

After all, there were no gay men. No one came out of the closet in high school, let alone in the army. There were no gays in Kfar Saba. Obviously there were boys like him and Matan – quiet, anxiety-addled youth smart enough to cleverly hide what they needed to. Who began searching, secretly, for others of the same ilk. Tel Aviv dazzled in the distance, twenty-three kilometers away.

He wanted to tell his mother that she should actually be proud of him, he had succeeded in his clandestine mission – his cover hadn't been blown, he had kept himself and his family safe, far removed from any association with that ugliness and all it implied. He had pulled it off, all through his boyhood and teenage years and bootcamp – had managed to fit in, to purge his body of any potentially ambiguous gesture. He played soccer, studied soccer, knew everything about the teams and players, not because he liked it, but because he felt it was the right thing to do, the best insurance policy. Soccer. And girls. He pulled that one off too: talked about them, let it be known that he lusted after them, that he too jerked off to their faceless figures. And he yelled and cursed and used his fists when necessary and never cried near his friends, no matter what. He had managed to be one of them.

Except for the harrowing fact that none of them secretly fantasized about the homecoming king, or the bootcamp instructor, and none of them, not even for a second, worried about the inner workings of their bodies when they huddled in the middle of the soccer field, or when they jumped all over each other after scoring a goal. He was the only one who suffered flashes of blinding panic at such moments of physical proximity, who dreaded the danger that lurked inside his own body, what it might divulge.

He wanted to tell his mother about the time in ninth grade when he kissed one of the girls in his class at a school party, trying to blend in, and felt nothing, worse than nothing, felt disgusted, from his saliva, from hers, smearing across both their faces. And at that moment, sitting at the table staring at the spot on his mother's back where her apron strings met, he wanted to open up, to tell her about Matan, and about Daniel, his first boyfriend. How he yearned to let it all out. But he didn't say a word, waited quietly for his father to come home,

for this lunch to start and be finished with, so he could go to his room and curl up under the blanket and sleep, from here to eternity, sleep and never wake up.

In the early evening he woke up wondering whether to stay for Friday night dinner or leave, slip out – not that he knew where to. He got out of bed, still wavering, and stood by the door of his small room, which was nothing more than a cubbyhole sectioned off from the living room. A construction worker had come to set up the partition shortly after Gavriel's bar-mitzvah, when his brother had begun to grow distant and stopped playing with him in the afternoons, suddenly in need of privacy, when his brother's body had begun to transform before Eliad's very eyes while he remained puny, callow, and was soon moved out of the spacious room they shared and into this small room so that Gavriel would have a space to grow into, a place to sprout his thick black hairs, to shave, to bring friends, to shut himself in behind a closed door.

He opened the door and shuffled into the bathroom to wash his face and hang up the laundry. Stepping back out into the hallway, he saw that his brother was already in the living room, and Eliad came up to him and said, "hey", and Gavriel returned the hey but didn't get off the couch to give him the usual slap on the shoulder, or muss his hair, and Eliad immediately knew that he knew, that their parents had told him. A tremor of grief shot through him, over losing the affection and closeness that they had enjoyed – that had been put on hold for a while when they were kids but then came back when he was enlisted, and Gavriel suddenly took an interest in him again, with real conversations, coming to the induction and processing base, and for weekend visits with his parents. Drained, he sank into the couch and reached for one of the weekend supplements scattered across the table.

Staring blankly at the pages, he hid behind the newspaper, trying to block out the world, accepting the verdict – the silence – from that Shabbat evening until his discharge from the army, when he would move out of the house and rent himself a room in Tel Aviv.

When they finally sat down at the table, dinner felt different somehow, as if his presence had changed everything, made the air denser, and yet they still exchanged a few words, mostly talking above his head, until at last Gavriel asked him a question or two about his week on the base and a semblance of normalcy slowly returned – a family having Friday night dinner. Eliad gave in, let himself adjust to this new situation, and they did too, or maybe gave up, on him it felt. But then a few weeks later on a Sunday morning his father offered him a ride to the base, and his mother packed him a box of cookies, and Eliad knew what this meant, what they were asking of him: to go back to the way it was before, when this ugly business wasn't a part of their lives. He understood that as long as he didn't talk about it or bring up the subject in any way, he could live among them as if he'd never confessed to a thing, and this whole ordeal would be neatly tucked into some other dimension – a parallel universe that had collided with theirs for a fleeting moment before pulling back – and he could spend his weekend leaves in the dimension where his family treated him like one of their own. As long as he didn't say the wrong thing, as long as he wasn't gay, not him.