

# The Kinneret

by Hila Amit

*Sue Lile Inman Fiction Winner*

When she was a girl, the Sea of Galilee, or the Kinneret as it is known in Israel, was just the Kinneret, and nowhere else in this somber land, which surrounded Hagit day and night, could make her emotions bob and float like that, just like her children in the inflatable tubes, swimming, spraying, squealing, giggling, in the deep dark-green water. They'd waved at her, relishing the surrounding green and their omnipotence, swimming away until she reached out with her soft hands, drowning them in hugs and kisses as if she had been gone for a whole year. Or hadn't seen them since infancy, when they snuggled in her bosom, hungry, sniffing, dissolving in sweetness between her breasts, tasting her milk, sucking her nipples.

When the Kinneret revealed itself to them, little Noam's eyes lit up in green bonfires of cold flame. He looked out the window excitedly; the sight of the water thrilled him just as it thrilled her when she was a girl. He was so completely bewitched by the Kinneret that when Hagit parked the car, he stepped out and went to the water without even taking his shoes off, the lake glinting in his eyes. It was as if he was sleepwalking, as if it had drawn him by some mysterious force.

Shrunken, shallow, polluted, the Kinneret flashed at them as the road curved. Driven to water by the humid

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air and the merciless heat, they took dips under the orange sun that cut through every layer of sunscreen that Hagit smeared on the children. Clad in their fluorescent bathing suits, they grinned whitely at her from the water. "Mommy! Mommy!" they cried out, so she would come help them look for living mollusks in their shells, for pretty stones they could bring to show-and-tell to the kindergarten teacher.

Before she knew loss, she had longed for the Kinneret. She sped over roads, counting down the miles all the way to Tiberias. When they made stops for little Noam, who couldn't hold it in, the name "Tiberias" shone like a north star on the green road signs, planted on the side of the road. Peeing, he turned his cute behind to the cars, darkly-tanned, as if he had sun-bathed all summer; his smooth brown hair blew in the wind, reminding her of his father—they were so alike back then. When Adi wanted chocolate milk, well, they stopped too—how could she resist those luxurious blond curls, the pale, freckled cheeks, those eyes, the same shade of green as her own? The two of them came out of the same womb but turned out so differently. They were going to the Kinneret, and they were entitled to treat themselves, to lighten their wallets; they would only think about the water, not about the overdraft fee.

Hagit had to make a stop, too. She told them to wait outside the stall and went in, pulled her jeans down hurriedly, afraid they would run off and disappear. She kept talking to them from the toilet. She told them to count to ten, to sing the song about the seasons they had learned in kindergarten; as long as she heard their

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voices she knew they were safe behind the door. When she wiped and zipped her pants and flushed she had already pushed the door halfway open, just to make sure that they were still there, that she hadn't lost them, that nothing had happened. They went back in the car and drove on, singing the nicest songs, an out-of-tune choir in a white Subaru. She had stuck old shirts in the windows to shield Adi and Noam from the sun, so they could doze off on the long drive. The car struggled uphill, but it was even scarier to go downhill, when the shirts flapped angrily in the wind.

"Are we there yet?" they screamed in the back. Soon, they'd be there soon. When the sun was on the other side of the sky, when the dials on her wristwatch met. Then they would be there, but for now they'd earned another popsicle, and an apple, and grapes, and a slice of bread with Swiss cheese, and *Bamba* snacks to crumble all over the seat and the bathing suits they insisted on putting on even before they had left the house. She let them, she'd have let them do anything they wanted, because they were going to the Kinneret. They had gotten up very, very early, and brushed their teeth with their Spiderman and Princess Jasmine toothbrushes, blue and pink, with toothpaste so terribly sweet it didn't even feel like it was doing anything; in a few years all their teeth would fall out, blackened, full of cavities, and it would be her fault, since she had given in to the commercials on cable TV, which she continued paying for despite the steeper and steeper prices. But she didn't want to tell them that; she didn't want to tell them about money just yet, about work, banks, loans,



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alimony or insurance. She wanted to spare them from the adult world that they were so keen to be a part of: They demanded to help chop vegetables for salad; light the stovetop; flip the omelet; stay home alone while she went down to the grocery store; walk up four floors on their own while she took the elevator, laden with the grocery bags, tired, her feet swollen, indulging them despite her fear. They made a nuisance, screaming and shouting all the way up, but she didn't care; she could hear them through the elevator walls and knew they were okay. They wanted to do everything alone, even swim without floaties. They didn't understand what she went through when she let them go off on their own: Her stomach churned with worry; her blood pressure spiked; her heart beat rattled bam-bam-bam, not letting up until she held them both in her arms again.

On that terrible morning, when she began to realize what was really happening, when she was still running around the beach with Adi in her arms, when everything inside her turned upside down and she retched and retched—on that morning the Kinneret was serene. The water was green and placid, shimmering, like the eyes of a beast bathing in the sun, digesting its prey. Look at me, the beast said, see what I can do.

## 2.

When Hagit was a little girl, her parents would set up camp on the smooth pebbles by the water: unfold the chairs, the water-coolers and the red pump, hopping on it with one leg to pump up the inflatable tube and the raft; if the pump was broken, her father, broad and



portly, would blow up the floats with his mouth. He would take the children on them, one-by-one or in twos. She loved floating in the green water with her father; her back to the shore, she imagined that the two of them were completely alone in that magical, marine expanse. Her father pushed them further and further in, ignoring her mother's calls, "Yigal! Yigal, not so deep!" He didn't care, he just smiled under his hat, which didn't prevent his bald head from getting so red with sunburn that Hagit couldn't help but laugh. There, in the water, she thought that he loved her the most, despite her wild hair, her squeaky voice, her clumsiness. She needed those moments when it was just the two of them. It was as if she had no siblings; she didn't have three older brothers and a little sister. There was only herself, Hagit, and her father, who lifted her high up and then dropped her. She came splashing down and sunk into the green before he pulled her up again, so quickly she barely knew what had happened, and he pushed her wet bangs to the side of her forehead and gazed deeply into her eyes. She vowed then that when she got married, she would only have one child, one child who would have her all to himself, who wouldn't need to vie for her attention with others. After long amazing minutes her father would turn the float around and head back to shore, and all of them—Yonatan, Nadav, Maor and Michaela—would jostle on the water's edge: "Do me, dad! It's my turn! My turn!"

Later on her parents divorced, and her mother never quite managed to life them up and dip them in the water and pull them back out, with such strength, with no fear. Instead, she played with them in the shallows and

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fooled around with the float: skirting the water's edge, going in, not going in, toppling over. She had them in stitches, but deep down they all just wanted their father to be there.

Hagit made a second vow then, that she would never get divorced; she wouldn't make her children feel what she had felt then. She was so certain that her love would be a true love, the kind that doesn't fade. Years later, when Noam and Adi were still babies and she and Shauli were drifting apart, she looked in the mirror and saw her mother: tired; wrinkled; five children around her, grabbing and screaming. She realized that she too would end up alone, with two kids that she would try desperately to amuse, making a fool out of herself. She too would scrutinize their smiles to make sure they were having fun and not just pretending to be, making sure they weren't just quietly missing Shauli and the games he played with them in the deep end.

When she took a day off to throw them a birthday party and told them they were going to the Kinneret, they went and told all their friends right away. They couldn't hold it in. They hadn't been to the Kinneret since the summer, and in just two weeks they would swim and play for a whole long weekend; three straight days that no one had imagined would end so abruptly, no one had imagined that her sister Michaela would be making phone calls all that weekend while her mother was taking care of Adi, who kept asking: Grandma, when is mommy coming home?

Hagit slept in Noam's bed. She didn't get up and didn't eat or speak. Only on Sunday morning, the day of

the funeral, Shauli lifted her up from his bed, kneaded her shoulders, which had become stiff from curling up in the too-small bed, washed her face, and got her dressed. She wouldn't remember any of this, and she wouldn't understand how she had even let him see her like this, half-naked, after they hadn't been together for so long. He drove them to her mother's apartment, left her in the car with the engine running, climbed up three stories, knocked on the door and asked his mother-in-law what they should do about Adi. So much was still unresolved between Shauli and her mother, but that day only sorrow remained. They decided that Adi should come with them, that it wasn't right to keep her from coming. They didn't want to have to tell her, when she grew up, that they had thought she was too young for that.

Her mother and Adi came down with him, and Adi didn't say hello even though she saw the tears in Hagit's eyes. She had never seen her mother cry. Hagit got out of the car and hugged Adi so tightly that she left marks on her thin arms that were still visible when they arrived at the cemetery. The two of them got in the back and sat close to each other. She put her right hand through Adi's curls, flattening them against her cheek. She didn't let her eyes stray from her, not even for a moment.

On the third day, when she fell apart in his arms and collapsed on the floor, he had to carry her to the bedroom, splash cold water on her forehead and calm her down. Very slowly and absentmindedly, after she closed her eyes, he caressed her wet hair, pushed it away from her face, and, leaning over her and holding



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himself together as much as he could, he fell asleep too, curled and shrunken in the corner of her bed; he didn't even take off his shoes and jeans.

When she woke up he was still there, and so was Adi, nuzzling against her. But part of her was missing, and destructive thoughts were running around in her head: their last moments together in the tent on the beach at night, when she put them to sleep and read to them from the book about Felix, the rabbit who writes letters, and Noam folded Felix's letters and slid them carefully inside of the envelopes in the book. He had to go pee, and he went out and stood under a broad eucalyptus tree, its bark peeling off in strips. She looked at him from inside the tent, how he pulled his pants and his underwear all the way down to his feet; he hadn't yet learned how to maneuver them like adults do. He turned his little behind to her and peed on and on. She couldn't see, she could only hear the sound of the urine wetting the tree until it petered off. He pulled his pants back up and went back inside, his shirt caught in the pants' elastic band. Tired but gleeful, he asked if the sun would wake them up at dawn.

Yes, it would wake them up so early that the Kinneret would still be completely quiet and shimmering, grey and silver. They fell asleep on either side of her, their legs and hands tangled on top of her; she couldn't tell where Adi ended and Noam began. Their breathing lulled her to sleep even though it was still early. She had wanted to call her mother and also to tell Michaela, who had moved up north, to come on Saturday to be with

them, for her sister to play with Adi and Noam, whom she hadn't seen in so long.

On that night, the first and the last—before she zipped the tent flap shut, after she opened the tent's windows and sprayed Noam and Adi with bug spray, so they wouldn't wake up bug bitten, so the mosquitoes wouldn't buzz in their ears, so they would sleep well after their long day—the lights of Tiberias winked at her from the far shore. They were reflected on the water like warning beacons, as if saying: Don't go to bed, don't fall asleep. Tiberias was silently screaming, communicating across the water. Something about the lights was hypnotic; her hands shook, and she trembled when she zipped up the tent. As she sunk into sleep, the only thing she could see through the tent's window were the stars, twinkling weakly. But on the far side of the Kinneret, on the shore of Tiberias, there were still people and cars and flashing lights. As if at an endless beach party, Tiberias danced on the water, a drunken bride in rented jewelry, shimmying and laughing and wild, while the Kinneret waited patiently, its surf low, as if saying: The party will be over soon, by the morning it will all be over.

### 3.

Shauli stayed with her all through the shiva. They didn't speak, but they knew that no matter what had happened before, they needed each other now. Their families, which had nearly drifted apart, filled the tiny living room like they had only once before, when Adi and Noam were born and the future still lay ahead like an

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inviting lake of happiness. He slept in the living room, while Michaela slept with her.

The tall Shauli had hypnotized Hagit with his black eyes, dark skin and brown hair; they stood in such stark contrast to her pallor. His strong arms, too, had a strange force over her; arms that fixed the apartment up before the twins were born, but were rarely engaged in any paying work. It took a divorce to shake Shauli from his endless idleness. Still, two years passed before he found an apartment nearby, and he had found and quit two jobs before he started working for a small construction company north of Tel Aviv, and started making a decent, regular salary, started seeing Noam and Adi on a regular basis, and finally, months later, started to pay alimony. Not that Hagit had ever complained; she didn't even tell her mother. She knew that in the end he would sort himself out and grow up.

The children loved going to Shauli's place. He was so animated with them: he would make them dinner; play with them until late; shower them and bring them, sleepy and content, back home to Hagit. When she and Shauli spoke, they only talked about the children, about birthday parties and kindergarten events; only once, when Hagit locked herself out of the house and she took the kids over to Shauli's apartment to wait for the locksmith, did he ask her how she was. He made her coffee and sent the children to his room with chocolate milk to watch television, and then, for the first time, they talked a little bit about themselves: about being alone, each in their own home. They didn't have it all figured out, but they knew separating was right for them, even if they



still loved each other; they knew they would never live together again.

During the shiva, Shauli sat next to her without saying a word, and she couldn't help feeling accused. She thought Shauli was silently blaming her for what had happened, for taking away his son, who looked like a small version of him, while Adi looked just like her: the same curly hair; the same big, bright, fluttering eyes. On the third day, when she collapsed, Shauli stayed with her until she fell asleep. Only then, when she was already on the cusp of unconsciousness, did he tell her that he knew she always kept her eyes open, that Noam simply woke up and left the tent, that there was nothing she could have done, that he wouldn't have noticed either. She mumbled brokenly, tearfully, that Noam was sleeping barely an inch away from her, that any other mother would have woken up if he had so much as rolled over in his sleep. Shauli embraced her and whispered to her that it wasn't her fault, it was an accident, no mother could stay up all night just to watch over the children. He had said the same thing when Noam and Adi were still babies, and Hagit would get out of bed every five minutes to make sure they were still breathing in their crib. But Hagit was beyond convincing, beyond arguing, and the tears kept coming, until she finally fell asleep.

#### 4.

In the morning, when her eyes suddenly opened through the sticky, yellow gunk, and she turned from side to side and looked at her watch, she felt something wasn't quite right. Her chest rose and fell too easily,

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nothing was nuzzling against her right side; only on her left was there something burrowed under the blanket. She didn't understand: How could one of them have switched places in the night? How could the two of them fit in the gap between her and the canopy? She pulled down the blanket and uncovered Adi's beautiful, sleeping face, but Noam wasn't there. Her heart thumped, and she was drenched in sweat; it was so hot all of a sudden, even though the tent flap was open. Barefoot, wearing only a t-shirt and underwear, she went out and shouted, "Noam! Noam!" She opened her eyes as wide as possible and turned around and around; everything turned around with her. The sun wasn't out yet: A blue dawn was only just pushing the dark away; the water was silvery and grey, peaceful.

She screamed his name and went back in the tent in a panic and tore Adi away from sleep and picked her up and started running along the water's edge, by the eucalyptus trees and by the parked cars in the lot; she screamed and shouted and cried, but he was nowhere to be found. Her voice was already cracked, barely audible, when people started emerging from their tents to see what was going on. A man came up to her—a not-quite old man, balding, in a white undershirt and grey shorts, silvery curls shining on his chest—and tried to calm her down: He held her arm firmly, asked her to sit. But she wouldn't listen, she could only say again and again that she had lost her kid. The man had an Italian accent, and his broken Hebrew drove her crazy. She screamed at him that her kid was missing, for god's sake, would he just help her look? He wasn't offended; he saw the alarm

in her eyes, and though she shouted at him, he didn't leave; he tried to calm her down and spoke carefully. People gathered around them, bleary-eyed, curious to see who was ruining their vacation. Among them, only the mothers' faces reflected Hagit's terror, and a few of them went back to their tents to check on their kids. A man called the police, even though the others told him he was getting carried away, that there was nothing to worry about, the kid was probably just playing on the beach somewhere and they'd find him soon. But Hagit couldn't hear them; she couldn't hear Adi's crying, either. While the others were arguing about what to do, she was hugging Adi too tightly, and her eyes were darting around. Her knees were shaking; her body trembled.

The man made her get Noam's photo from her wallet; she didn't understand what difference it could make, since any kid wandering around on his own at this hour could only be her Noam. He walked with her from one end of the beach to the other and got some other men to help too. Together they combed the beach so thoroughly that there wasn't any doubt left that the boy wasn't there. There was no calming her down anymore.

The man took Adi and her to the police station in Tiberias in her old Suburu. He had to drive; her eyes were completely bloodshot and she couldn't see anything. First, though, he gathered his few things together and stuffed her tent in the trunk, while she held Adi tightly, terrified. In the station, he told the officers that his name was Nico, that he had been sleeping outside by the water—he had planned to wake up at sunrise to the sounds of the waves—when Hagit's screaming woke



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him up. He told them that they had searched the beach, searched it thoroughly; that he had thought it would be better if he took them to wait at the police station, instead of letting them run around on the beach.

### 5.

They found him a little before noon, two beaches south: the blue, shrunken body of a boy. By then Shauli was already on the way north. The officer told him on the phone that his wife was waiting for him at the Tiberias police station. The officer said it—*your wife*—like it was a perfectly obvious thing; like the last two years had simply evaporated. The officer looked at her without a hint of sympathy, as if he had to call fathers to come look for their missing children every day, as if any second now Noam would be found. Barely an hour had passed before they called Shauli again to tell him to come identify the body. They didn't even think of asking her to do it. When she arrived at the hospital, Shauli had already been sitting for an hour, dazed, in the hall outside the morgue.

She had been crying all morning, but when she saw Shauli, a shriek escaped her throat and she nearly fainted on the floor of the grey, cool, airless corridor, by the shiny metal doors. She cried and cried until she had nothing left in her body to expel. She had already puked everything that was in her earlier, and her fingers were so white and bloodless they nearly had to hospitalize her. But she held herself together for Adi, who was waiting with the officer, the doctor on call, and the Italian man. After they picked up her, Shauli held Hagit's shoulders and led them to the Suburu, which was the only car in

the parking lot. He thanked Nico, grasping his hand weakly, and the three of them stepped into the car and fell silent, leaving Nico standing outside with his duffle bag, his meager belongings poking out of it in disarray—he didn't even have a tent.

That was how she remembered it: a great big emptiness, cavernous, awful. Only after they'd arrived at her home did Shauli call her sister and both grandmothers. Her mother was there in ten minutes, out of breath. She hugged her and cried, and she cried too, even though she thought she had no more tears left.

## 6.

When it was all over—the funeral and the shiva, the crying, the week that split her life in half—only routine remained, the little things she still had to go through, like the first time she took Adi, and Adi alone, to the kindergarten. They had to get back to their lives, just the two of them. On the way, she held Adi's hand tightly; she thought everybody was looking at her. And maybe it was Adi who was holding *her* hand, giving her the strength she needed to part with her at the gate. Then she dragged herself home, teetering with every step, and plopped down on the couch. She didn't move for hours; she didn't even notice the time until the phone rang. She got up and pinched her cheeks to get some color in them, drank two glasses of water—she was scared that she was getting dehydrated—and walked back to pick up her only child from the kindergarten.

That same morning—the first day after the shiva—she had made two sandwiches by mistake. For a whole

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week, with every breath and every step she knew that he was gone; for a whole week, this fact was shoved in her face, and the first morning after the shiva she forgot all about it.

She threw away one sandwich, quickly, before anyone—not Adi or her mother or Shauli—would see. She pushed the sandwich deep in the bin and piled trash on top of it, so no one would find it.

She still had to part with his things. Everyone weighed in: Do it all at once; do it one thing at a time. But she sat Adi down on the bed and asked her how long she wanted to keep Noam's bed in her room; she thought she could hold back her tears in front of Adi's big eyes. They decided together what had to go and what needed to stay and made plans for the space that would open up once the bed was gone: Adi would have a much bigger room, and Hagit promised to buy her a desk when she started elementary school that she would put by the window. Shauli and Hagit's brother moved out the bed, grunting and pushing and making a racket, but she wasn't there: She had gone with Adi to get ice-cream. When they were back, they saw that the room was frightfully big, even though all of his clothes were still in the closet, and the two of them lay down on Adi's bed, holding each other; Adi knew exactly when to let her be and when to laugh and when to talk. They fell asleep, intertwined, the scent of children's shampoo in Hagit's nose, Adi's curls tickling her nostrils and her ears.

They woke up together the next morning. Hagit was still unused to having one hand free while walking to the kindergarten. When she got back home she sat



down on the carpet in the twins' room, in Adi's room, and put all of his clothes in blue plastic bags, feeling the fabric and folding the clothes as if she was just tidying up after doing the laundry. She didn't want anyone to help her; she wanted to say goodbye on her own. She noted every stain and recalled what caused it, touched all the holes that he kept widening with his small fingers, smelled his scent on the clothes. She decided to keep a few: the outfit from Rosh Hashanah; his favorite Spiderman shirt; red underwear, so tiny; the pajamas, the ones with the orange-brown giraffes and the ivory colored, wafer-thin buttons. She cried into them, wiping her nose and eyes with the delicate sleeves; she didn't even notice the time.

When they called from the kindergarten, it was already one thirty. She ran out without putting on makeup, her face streaked with dried tears and her nose red. When she reached the gate she collected herself, wiped her face with her sleeves. Her arms shook when she walked in—what excuse could she make for being so late?—but Adi ran up to her and stroked her face. Hagit sat on the floor and hugged her for maybe five minutes. When the kindergarten teacher glared at her impatiently, Hagit realized, relieved, that it was a new kindergarten assistant, and that no one had told her: She thought she was just scatterbrained, a messy mother who is never on time, that this was the only problem, nothing else.