

The Lower City

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Maryam looks at the three of them, the two men and her baby. The man she's chosen; her daughter, without whom she can no longer remember what she used to do in the world; and Eliad, the man who'd found her through Ibrahim, as if by accident, affixing himself onto their shared life like an improperly healed broken limb, now pinned into the family experience, dragging, irreparable.

The weather is perfect, neither hot nor cold. The grass is green and uniform, no bald spots, pleasant and dry, not damp. If she allowed herself to fall down, her clothes wouldn't get wet, she wouldn't get dirty. But she's standing.

Maryam looks at them, watching them; how good this arrangement is: Ibrahim pushes Leila on the swing over a modern, colorful play mat. Playgrounds aren't what they used to be. They aren't like the ones with sandboxes where she and Danna used to play. Ibrahim is talking to Leila and Leila smiles, squealing with laughter, her little legs flying through the air.

Look at what Ibrahim is wearing. His clothes aren't suitable for summertime, aren't suitable for Haifa, for the Bat Galim neighborhood. He is glowing with a prestige that does not fit the spaces in which she dwells. She can no longer remember which of his clothes she's seen; everything always looks new on him, polished. Everything is a brand: the shoes, the sunglasses, the iPhone. He's swimming in a sea of money while she wades in the puddle of welfare. This was another reason she chose him—some promise of livelihood rather than just her reduced working hours. She couldn't pay for any of Leila's needs herself, not her afterschool activities and certainly not for private kindergarten or school, which she dreamed of for her.

He dresses Eliad, too. She's seen him showering him with gifts, and how Eliad has been looking better and better, clean-cut, organized, though his face still shows the crisis, the failure. The clothes aren't enough. One look in his eyes and you can see the whole story. And yet, there are moments – like this one right here, when he makes faces at Leila, laughing with her – that she can imagine him bursting with energy, full of life.

Her mother is on her way over to this playground by the train station. There is no playground in Halisa. When she and Danna were little, they mostly played in the dumping ground between the neighborhood houses, behind the mosque, between the trees, down endless, pointless, sidewalk-less streets, streets that ended with dried riverbeds, and which now were paved over with main roads. Back then, there were only abysses of broken green cacti, and they would pick the fruit, wearing their father's work gloves, wary of thorns, before delivering the yield to their mother, who sliced sections of juicy sweetness for them.

From the slope below their house, they would watch over the blue sea, the bay, picturing a different life, building palaces on the chalky, stony, refuse-laden dirt. Now, as evening falls, she recalls the long afternoons the three of them used to spend away from home, walking through their side of the city in a constant search for shade, for playgrounds, for benches their mother to plop onto, exhausted, refusing to go home, persuading them to stay outside longer and longer, until sunset, until they simply had to go back to their squat white cube of a home and make dinner.

Her mother, Subhiya, is now riding the No. 42 bus from Halisa, which crossed the entire lower city. They haven't told her yet. *Yet*, she thinks, but the possibility is fleeting away, out of reach. She thinks about it over and over again, when she watches Ibrahim and Leila together, or when she falls asleep alone at night: how could she do that to her? How could she shatter her mother's image of the good, normal family she'd produced? She wasn't like her sister, Danna—

the battered divorcée who isolates herself at home with their mother, who would remain living with her forever; She, the younger daughter, married a successful man, a breadwinner, and delivered her mother a sweet-sweet granddaughter. How could she take that away from her?

It also seems to her that Ibrahim was drawing away from that possibility as well. It appears that the reality surrounding them is putting down roots, thickening. They haven't discussed the topic in months, and perhaps the only person still expecting it to happen is Eliad. Eliad, who would never demand a thing of them, who would stay, no matter what. The way everything worked out in the end: almost perfect, what they've made for themselves here. What's left for her to covet? She's managed to create a full, healthy, multigenerational family story.

Now Leila is crawling toward her, her pants fraying around the knees, sullyng, but her beautiful daughter doesn't care, and Eliad gets up to watch over the advancing child. Ibrahim stands up too, smiling at her, looking back at Leila, who pauses, fixing her eyes on a large, red ant, trying to pinch it between her fingers, until she suddenly hears something and turns her little head, her eyes large, gaping. How much joy Leila brought into their lives, now that her sister's twins are already in high school, and everything in her family has fallen apart and was rebuilt.

Maryam recalls how she used to play with the twins in the backyard in Arraba when they were still toddlers, and how the two men—Wassim and her father—were still there, and her mother would sit on the floor with her granddaughters, in spite of her back and knee pain: how she glowed there.

And here comes her mother, emerging from the street, taking her final steps over to place a kiss on Maryam's cheek. Her face is sweaty from the walk over from the bus stop, and she wipes it with a tissue, picks up Leila, and gives her sticky kisses on both cheeks, already emitting a moan as she bends down, as she stands back up, and, with Leila in her arms, walks over to Ibrahim,

hugging and kissing him as well. Then she then turns to Eliad and asks, in Hebrew, “how are you?” she asks, kissing him too, already accepting his constant, regular presence, no longer unusual.

She must already know, her mother, Maryam thinks. She knows and refuses to let the story out, preferring this internal position, protecting it, securing a comfortable 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 is staged. after a lifetime of painful pretending with Maryam’s father, her mother is no stranger to putting on a show.

When the sun disappears they pack up and walk to Nahalal Street. Her mother now has trouble climbing up the three floors. Ibrahim takes them two at a time, Leila riding on his hip while his long legs stride up as if nothing could tire them out. Maryam, her mother, and Eliad follow behind, one step at a time, breathing heavily toward the end.

She looks at Eliad, who is a few steps ahead of her, looks at his body occasionally flinch with pain, his legs barely able to carry him. His illness is like another family member in the home they have made for themselves, like a rowdy teenager who could blow up at any moment.

Her mother reaches the top of the stairs last, the door left open for her. The apartment is exposed and inviting, Leila on the living room rug, playing with one of the dozens of toys that Ibrahim’s parents buy her incessantly. Every time they visit, they show up with a new box: wooden toys, shiny cardboard books they order from abroad, best not to know for what price.

Now Ibrahim is already making everybody tea in her kitchen, his kitchen, and even Eliad comes in, rather than retire across the hall, to his and Ibrahim’s apartment. He walks inside and sinks into one of the couches, looking exhausted, pained.

But her mother sees none of this. All she sees is her newest granddaughter glowing with joy. Her mother is so calm, so happy. Why risk it? Everything is working so smoothly, and the act

is perfect down to the smallest detail—they even hung some of Ibrahim’s old clothes in the bedroom closet, because from time to time her mother would launch into a feverish cleaning spree. They washed all their laundry together. It was as if he lived there.

But he *does* live there, he really is there every day, all the time—the division of days they’d come up with had remained a distant, vague idea, neither of them willing to give up a single moment with Leila. 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, takes Leila from her arms and lies down on the couch beside her, just like he did the day Leila came into their lives, when Maryam gave birth to her.

Eliad stood by the car, box cutter in hand, and scratched at the paint. The metal was hard, hot; the sun blinded him. He didn't even know what time it was. All he knew was that he'd woken up into this horror and now he had to fix it as best he could.

He closed the letter F into a square. He concentrated, moving the box cutter up and down, covering up the A, the G, the second G. But that wasn't enough. He had to cut lines diagonally, and right to left. He labored over it but was convinced it wouldn't change a thing and that anyone would still be able to see what was hiding there, what someone had written about him there, and his parents, they'd see it too whenever they looked at the car, no matter how many lines he scratched.

He also kept going so that he wouldn't have to go back inside and see the disgust on their faces. Especially his mother, who was now completely transformed, no longer resembling the person she'd been only yesterday, when he'd come home from his army base and she'd served him a plate full of home cooking and paused behind him after he'd sat down to kiss the top of his head, and he'd felt her hair on the back of his neck and over his shoulders, which were so sore from the heavy backpack he'd carried home from base, from the rifle that had hung on one shoulder, from the back-breaking kitchen duty, from all those greasy pails, almost as large as he was, that he had to scrub clean. After that, she'd sat across from him and watched him eat.

But this morning—the look, the touch, they were all gone. From this moment on she would only look at him with those black, empty eyes. Or, worse—she wouldn't look at him at all.

He didn't try to find out how much it would cost to replace the door. The car hadn't looked good for a long time now: the tin was dented, wounded, the paint scratched. One of the taillights was held in place by electrical tape. The scratches—the ones someone had made against him and

the ones he added around them—blended in with the rest of the neglect. He didn't check how much it would have cost because he couldn't afford it anyway, certainly not on a military salary. And even if he was able to pay for repairs, how could he possibly drive the car through his neighborhood to the mechanic with that word on the door?

Now it looked like he was finished. The letters under the crisscrossing scratches were just barely visible. Wounds on metal for wounds of his flesh. He dropped the box cutter, which he'd pilfered from his Dad's drawer. He was finished, but he didn't know what to do next. How could he go back inside? How was he supposed to look them in the eyes?

He hadn't even had coffee yet, because his father had banged on his bedroom door when he was still in bed and dragged him out to the parking lot. He didn't say a thing, only pointed at the car and fixed him with hard, panicked eyes. Then they both walked back into the living room where his mother was standing, waiting. His parents looked at him, saying nothing, and he didn't say anything either, didn't lie, didn't curse, didn't try to pretend like he didn't know what they wanted from him, like he was just as appalled by that word as they were.

What was he thinking when he chose that exact moment to confess? It could have gone a million different ways. His father could have beat him up; they could have thrown all his stuff out of the house; lock 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 lethal gas. They ignored everything he said, ignored him completely, and he lowered his eyes and waited and waited and waited, until tears choked his throat. And because he didn't want to fall apart in front

of them, he went to rummage through the drawers of the entryway, looking for something strong and metallic, and his eyes fell on the box cutter. He walked out to the parking lot like a man on a mission, forgetting about his fatigue and shoulder pain, forgetting he'd yet to have his morning coffee, or anything to eat. As he stood in front of the car, scratching away, he was only thinking about one thing - the nightclub on Lilienblum Street where he had spent the previous evening, and the guy who'd pulled him into the bathroom. He thought about the man's strong arms, which had pinned him to the cold, black tiles, about how he'd emptied himself out there, and how he went back to find Matan, smiling but exhausted, ready to go home, but ended up getting another drink, and dancing, and waiting for Matan to want to go home too, for Matan to go to the bathroom with someone and then come back, and only at three in the morning, after he'd had a coke and some water and waited an entire hour after his last drink, as recommended, only then did they drive back home to Kfar Saba. It never occurred to him to look at the car and he had no idea when that word had been scratched onto the driver-side door, if it happened back in Tel Aviv, by the club, or only later that night, in his own neighborhood. Maybe even this morning, as he was curled up in bed, enjoying a few more precious hours of sleep before waking up to what should have been a restful, laid-back Saturday.

When he finally went back inside, his parents were no longer in the living room. They'd holed up in their bedroom and he took the hint, went to his room, put some clothes on, then went back out to the car, started it, and drove off.

Without a clear destination, he drove out of his neighborhood and toward the center of town, not thinking about anything. As he drove the bleakest images flitted before his eyes, of what his life would be like from now on: long weekends on base without any family visits, 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; he pictured himself on his discharged day, alone, with no one waiting to take him home. It was a miracle that he hadn't gotten into a car accident, absorbed as he was in this sequence. In the enveloping sense of acceptance, he began preparing for the awful future ahead, with all the pain entailed in that revelation. He pulled up outside of Matan's building and debated whether to text him, call him, or get out of the car and buzz his parents' apartment on a Saturday morning.

When Matan came down, the two of them walked around the car together. Eliad led him to the driver's side door. Matan looked at it and said, "My God." Then they both got in the car and sighed, sitting silently for a long moment as Eliad let his body sink into the seat, trying to lose all sensation, trying to turn into mush that would drain down to where his feet used to be, then somehow leak out to the road and evaporate against the hot asphalt, dissipating into thin air.

"Do you want to sleep over at my place tonight?" Matan asked.

Eliad shook his head. "I've got to head back to base first thing tomorrow morning. They didn't tell me to leave, they just stopped talking to me," he said, getting a little choked up, recalling his mother's eyes, and falling silent again. He wanted to cry, but not there. Not in front of Matan.

"Come on, let's get out of this hellhole. Let's go to the beach," Matan proposed.

Eliad nodded.

There was barely any space in the parking lot when they arrived. They walked down the small slope to the sand. Eliad was sweaty, feeling filthy. He hadn't showered before getting into bed last night, and by morning he no longer had the option of showering at home. As soon as they'd found a spot on the beach, he pulled off his shirt and wanted to run into the water.

“Hang on, *kapara*, we just got here,” Matan said, laying down a blanket and lowering himself onto it.

But Eliad didn’t want to wait. He rushed across the sand in his boxer shorts, sank his body into the chilly water, and allowed it to envelop him from every direction. Then he returned to the blanket, lay down on his back next to Matan in their little corner and watched the sky through his large, 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, calm waves, and swam into the deep end, where there were no people around, then swam back to shore and stood with their backs to the waves, facing the sand and the rocky ridge.

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

“I don’t know. Maybe they’ll get over the shock. Maybe they’ll calm down by the time you get back,” Matan said, not looking at him. But Eliad didn’t want to go home and find out if they’d calmed down or not, if they were talking to him or not.

They stayed at the beach till sunset, then silently shook out and folded the blanket, climbed back up to the parking lot, and drove to Matan’s place, where they played some silly computer game in his bedroom. Eliad lingered longer and longer, delaying his return home as much as he could, but he was tired and knew he had to wake up early the next morning and get back to base. At some point he told Matan, “I’m out of here!” mimicking the hoarse voice of the popsicle peddler at the beach. Matan laughed and said, “Call me tomorrow from base.” Then he walked him to the door, where Eliad nodded his farewell and returned to the 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. But when he walked in, they

weren't there. The lights were off, and the house was silent, and he showered, brushed his teeth, set the alarm clock, burrowed into his little bed, and fell asleep.

The next morning, he got up and put on the uniform his mother had washed on Friday, before she knew what her youngest son was going to do that night. He slipped out silently without eating or drinking a thing, slipped out without the box of cookies his mother always packed for him, and instead of getting a ride from his father to Ra'anana Junction, got on a bus moving west, all along Weizmann Street, which had yet to awaken.

On the bus, he felt the tears he had swallowed down the previous day coming to the surface. He moved closer to the window and looked out from behind his sunglasses. It wasn't sunny enough to necessitate them yet, but this way he was finally able to cry.

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 appeared normal: his mother was standing at the stove, stirring pots in a typical image from his childhood. Seeing her, he realized how profound his confidence in all of this was—his mother, at home, cooking them food. No matter what happened out in the world, their small domestic space remained stable. Or at least it had been, 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.

In the bathroom, he shoved the clothes into the outdated washing machine. When he realized he didn't know what button to press and where to put the detergent, he was instantly drained of energy. He walked out into the hallway and almost yelled, "Mom!" but then bit his tongue, walked back into the bathroom, and sat down on the closed toilet lid. He took three deep breaths before managing to get back up and debate where to put the detergent. Three openings gaped at him from the white plastic, and he took a gamble. Then he turned the dial to the image that appeared most suitable to him, hoping he wouldn't break the washing machine. That's all he needed—to spoil something else for them.

As soon as he walked back out into the hallway, his mother called his name.

He sat down across from her at the kitchen table. They were silent for a long moment, and when he finally looked up, he saw the mascara running down her face in black streaks.

"I haven't slept in a week, Eliad," she said. She didn't really look at him, eyes lowered to the table.

He said nothing, a tremble running through his limbs. He lowered his eyes as well.

She didn't wait for him to reply. "I can't stop crying," she said. Now she did search for his eyes, to show him her tears. "My whole body hurts. My arthritis is back." She pointed at the bandage wrapped around her right wrist, a bandage he hadn't seen in a long time.

He stayed silent but sweat began beading on his skin. It was hot in the kitchen, with the pots on the stove and the oven emitting scorching air streams. He wanted to get up but couldn't move an inch. He wanted to shove a good answer in her face, but he was paralyzed, appalled by his own weakness, by the horror of what was to come.

“Your father, too. He hasn’t slept all week.”

He didn’t respond to that, either. He felt the tears of the past week rising into his eyes again and hesitated whether to let her see him cry. Would it inspire compassion in her, or disgust? Would it exacerbate what she must be thinking about him—her soft, feminine, gay son—or would it shake her up to see him as he truly is, and embrace him?

He recalled a photo from an old family album: him, sitting in the desert, crying, his face flushed, colorful hot air balloons in the background, his mother in a yellow dress, bending down to wrap her arms around 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 flame on the stove, paused silently by the pots. They waited for his father to come home; waited to eat together in silence.

He wanted to get up, but felt like he was glued to the chair, bound to the table, when suddenly a memory rose into his head—the first time he’d heard his parents talking about it. He was in eighth or ninth grade, and Dana International, the first openly trans singer in Israel, was being interviewed by the news in preparation for the Eurovision song contest. Eliad recalled his mother sitting in front of the TV, looking away, and muttering, “*Tfu*, disgusting, how could they send this *thing* to represent our country?”

He’d flinched by her side. The woman he’d just seen on television had sent a special shudder through him. He remembered how she got up on stage and took hold of that enormous trophy, and how his father had sneered, “Oh, great, now all the trannies in the world are going to come here.”

Eliad had curled under a blanket and let the old, sunken couch swallow him. What he wanted most was to get up and go to Tel Aviv, to join the masses at Rabin Square, to dance and jump into the fountain and stay there, never coming home again. But instead, he said nothing. Sat on the couch with his mother and father and said nothing. The next day he went to school and didn't say a single word about any of it. Who watched the Eurovision, anyway? Only fags.

In that moment, at the kitchen table, his mother looked just as she had back then, in front of the television, in front of that broadcast that made perfectly clear what was allowed and what was forbidden. Last weekend, he'd forgotten what was forbidden, and now he was pinned in place, saying not a single word, even though he wanted to share everything he'd been through since seventh grade—how his entire childhood he'd felt like a spy in enemy territory, a secret agent sent to complete a mission and survive—to survive within the gang of boys into which he'd grown up in elementary school, middle school, high school, his neighborhood, the military—a private in an anti-aircraft warfare base, always surrounded with boys who nothing but girls talked about nothing but girls. “Look at that piece of ass, I'm dying.” “Damn, those tits. You know what I'd like to do to her?”

He always felt obligated to take part in the 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 in the presence of those boys whenever the movies they watched included a sex scene, afraid that his high school friends would notice something, that the guys on base would realize he was different, recognizing him. ‘Faggot’ was the most common cuss word in the school corridors, in the cafeteria, on the base.

After all, there were no gay boys. No one came out of the closet, not during military service, and certainly not in high school. There were no gays in Kfar Saba. Obviously, there were - boys like him and Matan, quiet, anxious. From a young age, they searched for ways to conceal what they were going through, secretly seeking out kindred spirits. Tel Aviv dazzled in the distance, twenty-three kilometers away.

He wanted to tell his mother that she ought to take pride in him—he'd succeeded in the mission of not being found out, had protected his family, had passed under the radar. He'd managed to fit in, succeeding—during the days of childhood and youth and basic training—to purge his body of any potentially ambiguous gesture. He played soccer, knew everything about teams and players, not because he liked it - because he felt it was the right thing, the best insurance policy. Soccer. And girls. He was successful there too—he talked about girls as if he was thinking about them when he masturbated, and he yelled and cursed and used his fists when necessary and never cried near his friends, no matter what. He succeeded in being exactly like them.

But none of them dreamed in secret, like he did, about the most popular boy in class, or about the squad commander. None of them thought, even for a fraction of a second, like he did, about what might happen to their bodies when they huddled together in a soccer game or hoisted each other on their backs after scoring a goal. He was the only one who had to cope with the flashes of fear that had plagued him in those moments: the danger lurking inside his own body, in what might be revealed.

He wanted to tell his mother how he kissed one of the girls in his class in ninth grade, and how he felt nothing—felt grossed out, actually—by his own saliva, by hers. Everything smeared

all over their faces. Standing at the set table, facing the spot on his mother's back where her apron strings met, he wanted to tell her about Matan, about his first boyfriend Sharon, how he yearned to let it all out. But instead he waited in silence for his father to come home, for this lunch to begin and end so he could go to his room, crawl under the covers, and sleep for eternity, never wake up again.

In the early evening, he woke up and debated whether to stay for Friday night dinner or slip out somewhere. He got out of bed undecided and stood before the door to his room, this nook that had been given to him shortly after Gabriel's bar mitzvah, when a construction worker came over to close off the windowed corner of the living room.

By that point, his older brother had started to draw away from him, no longer playing with him in the afternoons, desiring privacy. His brother's entire body was beginning to change, while Eliad stayed shrunken, childish, even by the time he moved into that nook. They left the large room they shared to Gabriel, to give him space in which to grow, to sprout thick, black hair, to shave, to have friends over, to hide behind the closed door that used to belong to both of them.

Eliad went to the bathroom to wash his face and hang up the laundry. When he walked out into the hallway his brother was already in the living room. Eliad paused beside him and said, "Hey."

"Hey," Gabriel muttered, not getting up from the couch, not offering his usual pat on the shoulder, not running a hand over his brother's head.

Their parents had already told him. A shudder of grief ran through Eliad's body. Their intimacy was lost, having taken so long to renew once Eliad enlisted and Gabriel suddenly became

interested in him, talking to him, seeing him off at the induction center, visiting him on base with their parents.

All at once, his energy drained out and he sank into the couch. He picked up a newspaper from the coffee table and stared at the text and images, accepting his verdict: to say nothing from that point on, until his discharged from the army, when he would move out of the house and rent himself a room in Tel Aviv.

When the four of them finally sat down to the set table, he sensed that his presence weighed on them even as they conversed over his head. And still, Gabriel asked him a question or two about his week on base, sustaining some image of normalcy, a family having Friday night dinner. Eliad gave up, allowing himself to grow accustomed to the situation. And they gave up too—on him, or so it appeared.

But a few weeks later, his father suddenly appeared at the door on Sunday morning to drive him to the junction, and his mother handed him a box of cookies she'd packed for him, and he understood what they were asking for: a return to a routine in which this wasn't a part of their lives. He realized that as long as he didn't talk about it, he could live among them as if he'd never confessed a thing. That weekends would go back to normal, as long as he never said anything he wasn't supposed to say. As long as he wasn't gay.

“Miryam Ala-amori?” the receptionist asked from behind a pair of red, thick-framed glasses, mispronouncing her name.

Maryam’s heart jumped in her chest. Perhaps everything had been a mistake, and they were about to tell her she hadn’t passed the audition and was not accepted into the art school. She’d be sent home, walking down the Carmel Mount in the scorching heat, flinching, crying, attending the neighborhood high school just like all her girlfriends, just like her sister who’d barely graduated before she was married, as if the neighborhood school was nothing more than a greenhouse for young brides. Maryam so badly wanted to get away from there, to see a different life.

For six long months she worked tirelessly to get into the private high school for the arts, and now she was standing in front of the secretary, the first representative of the school she was faced with, and mumbled, “Yes, that’s me.”

The Hebrew emerged from her mouth meek and squeaky—a language she hadn’t truly needed until that point, at least not orally. There was only that one time at the hospital, when they had to explain what had happened to their mother. They’d said, “She fell, she fell in the bathtub.” Then she and Danna spent extensive moments alone in the emergency room, waiting to hear if she died, their mother. If everything was all over.

“Dance major, correct?” The spectacles tilted down toward the forms, and Maryam looked around. Like an antenna, she suddenly picked up an Arabic accent, just like hers, which crawled into her ears from a nearby table, a different secretary, who was saying, “Ah, yes, Ibrahim Hajihaya! We’ve heard so much about you.”

She looked at him, this boy, whose name was also being butchered now. But this boy wasn't only Arab, he was also famous, and he awakened a profound curiosity in her—the way he stood there, standing tall, handsome. Had she not overheard his conversation with the secretary she would never have suspected he was Arab. There was no similarity between him and the boys she went to elementary school with—something about his clothes, his facial expression, his haircut. She lost a few minutes as she stared at him, missing what the secretary was saying, until finally the woman handed over a folder filled with forms and pointed her out into the hallway to look for her class and keep the line moving.

Almost two weeks went by before the teachers figured out how to say her name properly. The girls who welcomed her into their circle did so first, and they were all sweet—a little too sweet, she sometimes thought, as if she was some kind of special attraction or a welfare case, or both. She didn't feel she belonged in this place and with these people, and the school year started with chilling waves, like the freezing gusts of wind that would blow into her house when she waited with her mother and sister, the hour growing late, her father not yet returned. They could already feel the storm approaching – how soon the door would fly open while the world would collapse.

In class and in the hallways and the changing rooms and before performances she did her best not to focus on her distinction, her otherness—not only in terms of language, but also in terms of her clothes and shoes and backpack. As early as her first year at the school, in ninth grade, she realized she would not become a great dancer.

But she was out of the neighborhood. At least she'd paved herself a path that may lead to a different future than her sister's, who was preoccupied that entire year with her approaching wedding with that man, Wassim. Maryam wasn't sure what to think about him. All she knew was

what would come after: how she'd remain home alone, without Danna to live with through those moments when their father exploded, and their mother fell apart.

She knew she wouldn't keep dancing. But in the studio, which was at least twice the size of the rec center dance room, she allowed herself to move to the sounds played by the music students—a pianist accompanied the modern dance classes, while a drummer kept a beat during ballet and technical classes—and felt her body growing strong and stable, her legs jumping higher and higher during exercises, hopping diagonally from corner to corner. Inside the momentum and the rhythm, she could finally let go of all bothersome thoughts and give in to the dance, focus entirely on the body.

She wasn't the best dancer, nor the second or third best, but that didn't bother her. She gave up the attempt to impress anyone from the start, concentrating only on herself. She discovered her finest talent during composition classes, when she began to create brief choreographies, a duet with another dancer, pieces for a quartet. The girls accepted her invitations, liked working with her, and she gave in to the feeling of being necessary.

She also became addicted to the touch: to the healthy, beautiful bodies she leaned on during the dance, how they snaked their skinny forms around each other, how their hands ran over each other's skin. She felt excited, trembling all over with the sensation. They'd roll around on the floor, on top of each other, sweaty, panting, and she would walk out of these classes joyful and energized by the responsiveness of the wriggling, breathing bodies.

Ibrahim was the one to make the first move. It happened by the kiosk, while she was eating a seven-shekel grilled, burnt, dripping, delicious cheese sandwich. She was sitting on the concrete bench in the yard, and he sat down beside her. She could tell right away that everyone was looking

at them: the only two Arabs in the entire school. But then she pushed the thought away and asked him what his major was, and why he was so famous.

He laughed. “Music,” he said. “And I’m not famous. It’s just that my father runs around town, showing off.”

A shudder shot through her, like a slight poking in the rib cage, because her father never showed off for her, never participated in anything they’d done, never took pride in them.

“Sounds like a sweet dad,” she said.

Ibrahim smiled. “You don’t get it,” he said, “I can’t catch a break. All day long just practice, practice, practice.” He spoke the final three words in an adult voice, his finger wagging toward the kids in the yard. From within his imitation, she pictured a worrying, caring father with features that matched Ibrahim’s, only older.

It was only a week later, when she visited Ibrahim’s home for the first time, that she realized she also knew his father. She used to see him every day for eight years during elementary and middle school. He didn’t recognize her at first, but when he shook her hand and gave her a second look, he said, “Don’t I know you?”

She lowered her eyes before her former principal. “Yes, I used to go to Abdul Rahman al-Haj,” she replied.

His eyes lit up. “Oh! You’re the dance student!” he recalled.

She smiled. “Yes.”

“*Mumtaz*, I’m glad Ibrahim found one of our own to share the high school experience with. He was all alone during elementary school.”

She glanced at Ibrahim, who’d also attended elementary school among Jews, and wanted to ask some questions, but just then his mother walked in. There was something striking about

her—beautiful, in tight, elegant clothing, the kind her mother only wore for holidays or weddings, and even then she didn't look like Ibrahim's mother.

“Oh, who's this?” Najwa asked. Her perfume following her like the train of a queen's gown.

“This is Maryam. She goes to school with me,” Ibrahim said.

Najwa gave Maryam two soft kisses and said, “Well, I'm going to want to hear all about you, but first thing's first—we've got nothing in the house. Should we go out to eat?”

“*Yalla*,” said Naader, then cried, “Amir! Maisa!”

A boy younger than Ibrahim appeared in the living room, followed by a girl who looked to be almost her age, and said, “*Ana mish jouana*.”

But Najwa wouldn't have it. “I don't care if you aren't hungry. You'll sit with us. *Ma shiftesh kul el yom*.”

They all walked down to the neighborhood restaurant, where Najwa and Naader ordered more and more food, creating a spread like Maryam had never seen before, and she ate so much that she couldn't have even one more bite, and finally understood the difference between families with money and families without—the serenity that rested over all, no calculations required, and one could eat out any time, no special occasion needed. Meanwhile, her family had celebrated Danna's engagement at home, in the small, tiled yard and in the living room, without any purchased food. She, her mother, and Danna had cooked for days to get everything ready.

At the restaurant, Najwa asked her lots of questions. Like her husband, she too stated how glad she was that Ibrahim had made friends at school, as if he, the star, needed her. “Come visit us any time you'd like,” Najwa said as she drove Maryam home, the Halisa houses and the overflowing trashcans already appearing.

“I will,” Maryam replied, quickly getting out of the car. She waved at Ibrahim’s mother as she hurried into the house, hoping her father didn’t see her, that he wouldn’t ask her whose car this was or where she’d been. She couldn’t wait to get to school the next day, to get a hold of Ibrahim during recess and to ask him all about his mother and the rest of his family, and enjoy a little more of that goodness he brought everywhere with him; to glean a little more of that halo of wealth and calm, to let it envelop her as well.

“So why the oboe?” she asked Ibrahim a month later, in his living room, the clean and quiet space that was completely separate from the bedrooms and the kitchen—as opposed to her own home, where there was no separation, and whatever happened in the kitchen took over all other spaces.

From her spot in Ibrahim’s living room, the kitchen wasn’t even visible. She was sitting on a regal brown leather sofa, listening to him playing, and memorizing the names of composers: Albinoni, Marcello, names she’d never even heard before. She flipped through dozens of books in that living room, opening and closing them, trying to read, to understand, listening to the high notes Ibrahim produced as he blew into the thin wooden mouthpiece, his cheeks puffy and red, his eyebrows rising and falling along with the sounds.

“I started with the flute,” Ibrahim explained to her. “And at some point, people from the Music Fund showed up at school and let us try all sorts of wind instruments. One of them decided that I was an oboe. Believe me, if I’d have known, I would have switched a long time ago. Now it’s too late.”

“Why would you switch?” she asked.

Naader's voice sounded, muffled, from the kitchen, talking on the phone. Whenever she visited, she was surprised to find his father always home while his mother was usually gone, returning last.

"The mouthpiece breaks every week or two," Ibrahim said. "And it's difficult. Physically. And the stress is hard." He placed the oboe back in its case, wrapping the mouthpiece with white fabric. "I still buy mouthpieces," he explained, "but in principle I'm supposed to make them myself, whittle them out of wood. I swear to you that if anyone told me in advance, I would have chosen the French horn or the violin or whatever. But I can't switch now," he said.

She nodded, and they went out for a walk. They went to get ice cream, to beat the heat. It was always so hot in the lower city of Haifa.

"Are you going on the Poland trip with the rest of the class?" she asked him as they sat under a plastic tarp, licking ice cream as fat stray cats rubbed against their legs. One of them, black and nip-eared, sat down beside her, fixing his eyes on her.

"Poland? No way." he said. He explained he had a competition the same week of the trip. "And anyway," he added, "my parents won't have me going on this thing. They say it's like celebrating the Holocaust, and they want me to learn about it from a less Zionist angle. I'm not supposed to attend Memorial Day services, either."

Maryam nodded. She didn't know what to say and didn't fully understand his meaning. Someone threw something down from one of the balconies, and the black cat lunged down the street.

"Are you going?" he asked.

"No," she said, "it's too expensive."

He licked his ice cream, which was dripping all over the cone, and said, “Then why don’t you come to my competition? It’s kind of in the middle of nowhere, but you can ride with us.”

“What’s the middle of nowhere?”

“Ashdod,” he said, shooting her a quick glance, wrestling the ice cream that dripped down his hand.

“Well, that’s not exactly the middle of nowhere,” she said.

He laughed, wiping his fingers with a napkin, then balling the napkin up, tossing it toward the nearest trashcan, and missing. Then he licked his fingers, one by one. She aimed her napkin into the trashcan and made the shot.

She said she’d be glad to come, and they walked out onto Hanevi’im Street and waited for the bus to take them home, because it was too hot and she was too tired to walk. Night was advancing, filling the sky.

During the short bus ride to her neighborhood, from his house to hers, the entire world changed beyond the window. By the time she got off the bus, darkness was all around, and the air had cooled. When she walked inside, the door slammed behind her, pushed by a draft.

But she didn’t make it to the competition, couldn’t even call and let Ibrahim know, because she spent that day locked in her room while her parents were in the living room, trapped in one of their moments of hell. She didn’t have a cell phone yet, and would have had to use the phone in the kitchen, but she decided to stay in her room.

Ever since they were little girls, their mother had warned them never to dare come out of their room while these scenarios played out. To stay behind closed doors, no matter what they heard from other parts of the house. She even gave them keys, so they could lock themselves inside

the pink-painted room, as if a locked door could have stopped their father, had he decided to enter. In the middle of the door was a glass square decorated with flowers, which he could have easily smashed in order to reach an arm in and unlock the door from the inside. But he focused on their mother. Maryam and her sister spent years watching violence unfold through that glass, catching glimpses of their mother between the painted flowers, until finally he concealed her with his own body.

To this day, she can recall them looking out into the kitchen and the living room. They could hear everything, but only see snatches. The painted glass broke their mother into smaller and smaller parts, her house dress torn into more and more pieces: a red rip by the kitchen counter, a blue rip on the couch. From behind the glass, they watched him finally step out of the house while she, or sections of her, lay unmoving on the floor.

It happened again on the day of the competition, again with no good reason—there was never a reason. Maryam had been let out of school early because the rest of her class was already on the Poland trip, and classes were canceled. Back at home, she'd already changed her clothes and was ready to head out when she heard him shouting, followed by the sound of objects thrown on the kitchen floor. She pushed herself against the wall by the door. She couldn't see a thing through the glass. Only the color pink. She listened, waiting to hear her mother's voice. Normally, her mother would respond by shouting too, but only until the first punch. Then she'd fall silent all at once.

Maryam never saw it happening, but she could picture it: her face draining of life, her entire body freezing in place, as if everything would hurt less if she wasn't present, there in body only and not in soul. These moments could linger for ages until Maryam finally saw the dark lump of her father's body passing outside the glass on his way out of the house.

Only after they heard the door slamming would she and her sister step out of their room to check on their mother—to see if she was breathing, if she needed help getting up from the floor, if all her limbs still worked, still able to spread and bend. If anything was broken. After they helped her to the bedroom or the bathroom, they'd clean up the mess and the blood, if there was blood. They'd give her a pill, so she'd sleep and forget. Unless he'd hit her in the head—then sleep wasn't allowed. The emergency room doctor had explained that to them when they were just little girls.

So Maryam didn't go to Ashdod, nor did she call Ibrahim. Instead, she cleaned up, then lay in bed with her mother until her father returned, drunk, very late at night, and fell asleep on the living room couch. The next day, at school, she made up some mumbling excuse, but Ibrahim wasn't hurt.

Two days later, he was informed he'd won first place, and she joined his family for a celebration in the German Colony, at a restaurant where, out front, stood a woman whose sole job was to let people in and direct them to the right table. All through dinner, she stared at Ibrahim's mother, hoping she and Danna turned out like her: if not that rich, then at least that independent and powerful and happy. Maryam would attain this, she realized then, not through dance, but through an endeavor that could financially support her. It was there, at that restaurant, that she decided to study a profession, to attend university and not some liberal arts college in the Galilee like her sister had until she dropped out due to her pregnancy. Maryam said very little all through dinner, keeping a fake smile taut across her face, anything to avoid raising any suspicions or questions. After dinner, Najwa drove her home, as usual, preceding with her regular refrain: "Forget the bus, I'll drive you. It'll take two minutes."

And at home, when she got back, it was a normal evening; Sometimes, evenings were normal. Her parents were sitting in front of the television, and she watched with them until she grew tired and went to sleep, her face still sore from the forced smiling.

In Tel Aviv, after being discharged from the military, nothing was as glamorous as Eliad had imagined. Back when he was a teenager and rode the local bus from Kfar Saba with Matan and Sharon, going to clubs and to the gay youth center and to Dizengoff Center and to the beach, the city had been a lifeline. But once he rented a room in a shared apartment, he went on behaving just as he had at his parents' home: locking the bedroom door behind him, collapsing into a cold bed, wanting only to sleep and never wake up.

That entire first year, before Matan was discharged as well and moved to Tel Aviv, he would drink alone in dark bars, hoping in vain to find someone with whom to spend the night. He worked during the days, first in a preferred veteran job, to receive his military grant, and later at any job he could find. Sometimes he worked seven days a week—to pay back loans, to survive, and especially to avoid taking out another loan. He worked holidays, volunteered to take every shift. He didn't have anywhere to go or anything to celebrate anyway.

This was after Gabriel's wedding and everything that had preceded it. His parents hadn't offer to help him move and never visited him in Tel Aviv, afraid of the city and everything it symbolized to them. On Fridays he'd take the last bus from Tel Aviv, and after dinner his father would drive him back to his apartment. Neither one of his parents asked him about his personal life. They only asked about work and his apartment, not about life itself. They didn't even dare ask about his roommates, and he figured he could live in two parallel worlds. As he ate the hot home-cooked food he'd spent all week yearning for, he thought things might change, his parents and brother would one day talk to him about it, accept it. He was willing to wait; to give them time.

Perhaps it was better to keep his expectations low; to live the way he had as a teenager, always on high alert. Because back then, at that dinner, when Gabriel and Anat announced they were getting married, his mother asked him in front of everyone else, “So, Eliad, when are you going to meet a nice girl and get married?”

She smiled at him as if this was a possibility. Anat’s eyes were the only ones in which he recognized signs of shock. His father and Gabriel said nothing, slowly chewing the meat his mother had cooked while Eliad fell apart from the inside, realizing that nothing had changed. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood up, his chair creaking along the floor, looked at his mother, intending on saying something, then turned to the front door and walked out.

The money in his pocket wasn’t enough for a cab ride to Tel Aviv, so Eliad walked west along Weizmann Street, dialing Matan’s number as he walked. Matan greeted him with morose silence. In his bedroom, they sat down on the mussed bed and stared at the wall. They were exhausted of the world, which took breath after breath from them.

He attended the wedding out of respect for his brother, holding in his restrained rage. He spent most of the night drinking, wanting to forget the entire event from beginning to end. Not only the marriage ceremony, but the fact that he had a family at all. When he got back to his apartment, he plopped into bed in his festive clothes, and slept until he had no choice but to wake up for work.

He showed up to his shift with a terrible headache and fought to keep his eyes open for the next eight hours, fixing them on the screen, attempting and failing to adjust the headphones so they didn’t hurt his ears. Every other computer was taken, and there was no other pair to grab, so he remained in his seat, which creaked whenever he changed positions. His headache got worse.

The customers on the other end of the line irritated him, and he lost his voice over the course of the shift. Every thirty minutes he went to the faucet to fill up his water bottle, then visited the bathroom, wiling away the entirety of his short break. In the bathroom mirror, he saw the red marks the headphones had left on his ear lobes. He washed his face, massaged his temples, and at lunch, when he stepped outside for a cigarette and a cold and dry falafel sandwich, he wondered how he'd make it another four hours. How would he survive this day.

His brother called a few days after the wedding. Eliad was home, exhausted from work, lying in bed completely naked.

“Hey,” he said to his brother, and his mother and father appeared in his mind’s eye, Gabriel and Anat standing beside them, all four dressed up and smiling, wedding lights twinkling all around.

“I wanted to ask you,” Gabriel stammered, “if everything—” He paused to clear his throat. “If everything is all right.”

Eliad tried to recall when he'd left the wedding and if he'd done anything embarrassing—he'd been falling-down drunk. Did he throw up? Say anything inappropriate? Have an outburst? “No, not really,” he said, sitting up. He looked around for a pair of boxers to slip on and walked into the kitchen, having made sure none of his roommates were around. He opened the fridge, hoping to find something to drink, then closed it and returned to his room, fatigued.

“You know, you shouldn’t take Mom and Dad so seriously,” Gabriel said.

“Oh, yeah?” he said and collapsed back into bed. “You try sitting through a family dinner when everyone totally ignores you -” He wanted to say something else, but his throat went dry. He looked around his room for something to drink and recalled that he hadn’t brought a gift to the

wedding. “Gabriel,” he croaked, “I’m sorry I didn’t bring anything. I... I can barely make ends meet.”

“Forget it,” Gabriel said. “I’m just worried. You don’t come to dinner, you don’t talk to Mom and Dad.”

“Maybe you should be calling them, not me,” Eliad said, burrowing his finger through a hole in the sheet. Suddenly he felt cold. He curled up into the blanket, looked at the dirty windowpane, and remembered the many times he’d meant to clean it but didn’t.

“You know, Eliad, they’re not... they aren’t your age, they aren’t from Tel Aviv. You have to understand them too, it isn’t—”

“I have to understand *them*? I *have* to?” Eliad cut off his brother. He hadn’t meant to raise his voice. Then he pulled the blanket over his head and sank into the mattress. He wanted to hang up, but he stayed on the line, saying nothing, trying to settle his nerves.

“I’m just saying,” Gabriel continued, and Eliad felt fury rising from his feet to his neck. “It’s just hard on them. Try to see it from their perspective.”

“I’m not the grownup here,” Eliad barked at him. “You get that, don’t you? You get that she’s my mother and I’m her son. *She’s* the one who needs to understand *me*, not the other way around.”

“Eliad.” Gabriel’s voice was sharp and quiet. Eliad let out a long sigh. They were silent for a moment, and then Eliad pulled off the blanket, having heated up, looked at the ceiling and then at the floor. He just wanted this conversation to be over, for Gabriel to leave him alone.

But Gabriel said, “Okay, do you want to come over for dinner this Friday? We’re hosting.”

“Are Mom and Dad coming?” Eliad asked and suddenly noticed a trail of ants walking along the floorboard. He tracked their route, trying to figure out where they were coming from. He got up, intending to kill them and collect them with a wet piece of toilet paper.

“They are, but dinner’s at our place,” Gabriel said.

“Then no.”

“Eliad.” Gabriel’s voice went low again.

Eliad hated how calm his brother was, how nothing ever touched him. “Don’t ‘Eliad’ me!” he hissed. “What’s her problem? What’s so hard about picking up the phone? I’m her son. Why do I have to... to...” He fell silent, no longer sure what he wanted to say. He took one long breath, let it out, and told his brother, “Just let me know the next time you’re having dinner without them.” Then he walked into the kitchen and grabbed the rag by the sink.

“Fine, fine, all right. Anyway, how’s work?” Gabriel asked, dragging the conversation. Eliad returned to the floorboard and swiped the rag over the row of ants. “Same old shit,” he said, watching the ants that clung to the rag along with the dust. “You?”

“Busy. I took a week off for the wedding, and now they’re piling things up on me like crazy.” His brother took a breath. “But fine, I’ll hold on till Passover, then we’re going away.”

“Oh, yeah?” Eliad feigned interest. He walked back to the kitchen, rinsed the rag, and watched the tiny black ants falling to the yellowing, dirty bottom of the sink.

“Yeah, a honeymoon, you know. The wife insists.” Gabriel laughed.

“Where?” Eliad didn’t laugh along. He felt shattered.

“Not sure. She wants Thailand, I want Mexico. We’ll see.”

Eliad hummed some acknowledgement into the phone and then stopped listening to his brother, who was prattling on about Anat and their vacation and how they were already trying for

a baby. He thought about Thailand and Mexico, how badly he wanted to travel, but how on his salary and with his rent he couldn't really afford to do anything. For a moment, he forgot all about the beginning of their conversation and all about his parents and the tension between them. All he could see was his bank account, the loan he'd taken out when he was discharged and which he was still paying off, wondering when he'd be finished, when he'd have the chance to save some money and go traveling with someone. It was a painful realization: the truth was, he hadn't felt anything real for anyone since Sharon.

He was somehow able to pull himself back into the conversation for long enough to say goodbye to his brother, then sank into the bed again, covering up and closing his eyes, hoping to fall asleep. But a few moments later he sat up, rolled a joint, texted Matan, and waited.

One of his roommates must have let Matan in, because his room wasn't ready yet when he heard the knock on his door. Until that point he'd always been able to turn down Matan's offers to visit him. The room smelled from moldy leftovers on plates he'd failed to return to the kitchen. He only cleared the dishes when his roommate walked into his room with that look in her eyes. Then he'd wash them all, not talking, not looking at her.

Matan took a long scan of the room and said nothing. He opened a window to let some air in. The chill was refreshing, and Eliad fell back onto the floor mattress. Matan sat down on the small couch and looked at him.

“What's all this, *kapara*?” Matan asked.

Eliad evaded his friend's eyes, the squeaking of his voice. He listened to the bustle of the street that invaded the room through the open window.

“You don't look like you're doing too well.”

“You think?” Eliad chuckled, revealing tobacco-yellowed teeth. He could feel Matan’s eyes as they scoured the space around him, the neglect. A few bright purple Cellcom shirts were strewn on the floor. If he didn’t wash them soon, he’d have nothing to wear to work.

“What are we going to do with you?”

“What are you going to do with me? What is there to do with me?” Eliad said. “Everything’s shit.” He scrounged around in his pockets for the lighter, then found it next to the pillow, wedged between the mattress and the wall. His cigarettes were on the floor next to the bed. He picked up the pack, lit one up, and took a deep puff.

“Why don’t we find you a shrink?” Matan looked out through the open window, then back at Eliad. “Maybe meds? Anything to help you snap out of this funk.”

“A shrink? Spare me this psychology nonsense,” Eliad waved him off, got up, walked to the window, and blew out the smoke.

“You know,” Matan continued, “someone to talk to. It’s not like your family situation is normal.”

“Forget a shrink,” he said. “Help me get a boyfriend.” He tapped the ashes out the window, staring at the dark street.

“*Kapara*,” Matan said, “I say this with love. No guy is going to spend the night in this horror show you call a bedroom.”

Eliad chuckled and nudged an empty beer bottle lying on the floor with his foot. The bottle rolled away until it was blocked by a T-shirt.

“Get me out of here for a little bit,” he whispered.

As always when they wandered, they ended up on Lilienblum Street, where they sat down at a bar. Eliad ordered them both beers, feeling stifled and embarrassed, having had Matan see his living conditions. He took a few quick gulps.

“My brother gave me a talking to. Said I shouldn’t take my parents so seriously.” He tilted the glass toward his mouth and looked around, then fixed his eyes on a guy at the other end of the bar, whose biceps bulged out of the white sleeves of his shirt. Eliad was waiting to see if the guy was alone or waiting for someone. He wanted to spend the night with a stranger, someone who knows nothing about him, someone who could make him feel alive. He glanced at his own arm, still holding the pint glass. He tried to make a muscle without Matan noticing, without anyone noticing. He flexed and released, flexed and released, but he hadn’t been in the gym for too long. He’d become such a tired person.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Matan said. “There’s no right or wrong here.” Someone approached the guy in the white shirt and placed a hand on the back of his neck. Eliad returned his eyes to Matan.

Matan had told his parents everything after he’d settled down in Tel Aviv. He told them over text, unable to say it to their faces. They only responded three days later. His mother came over, sat with him, and wept. Matan was mad at her tears. He didn’t speak to his father for a week until his mother finally dragged both of them to a family therapy session.

Eliad looked over the bar again and saw nobody—everyone suddenly appeared blurry, unreal, intangible. He slumped in his seat, and felt his tears about to burst once more, his nose turning red, and did his best to keep it all inside. He fixed his eyes on a point in space, took another sip, and thought about saying, *Matan, I really hate my life*. But he knew that would let the tears

out. “Thanks for being here,” he finally managed. “Sorry to be such a ball of depression and self-pity.”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.” Matan smiled. “At some point it’ll be my turn to fall apart, and then you’ll take care of me.”

Eliad saw Matan’s smile through his veil of tears and smiled back, though he knew Matan would never fall apart. He was so strong and stable. Eliad downed the rest of his glass.

Matan patted his arm. “Come on, let’s get you back to that nightmare of a bedroom,” he said. “We’ll clean up a little and get you in bed.”

Eliad nodded. They paid and walked in the cold air, and he tried to gather himself, to appear cheered up and energetic, as if this conversation had helped him somehow, as if he had the strength to move on, if only to make sure Matan didn’t worry. Because what if Matan got sick of what’s become of him, too? Sick of seeing him wilting like this, sinking.