

Selected Stories

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ABSTRACT

Selected Stories

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Selected Stories is a collection of stories about solitary drifters and domestic disasters, failed relationships and failed dreams. It responds to humanist notions of agency which link insight and change, often considered the motors of narrative. The characters in these stories are everyday losers haunted by the desire to break free of their natures and alter their circumstances. Their actions bring change, but too often the “insights” driving these actions are illusory, and the changes are unexpected and undesirable. Genuine insights, when they occur, are messy and half-formed, and defy the characters’ attempts to articulate them or apply them to their actions. The limited, often unreliable, access given to the characters’ thoughts and motivations reflects their inability to perceive their lives as coherent narratives.

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UNDER THE BRIDGE

All three of them fell silent when they turned off the gravel track onto the smooth pavement of River Road. Even Chris quit chattering in the back seat as the Thunderbird coasted the length of the canal toward Lock 13. With the windows rolled up, the only sound they could hear was the soft growl of the car's Windsor V8. In the front passenger seat, Joe leaned back into the red leather upholstery and studied a row of white yachts lined up in the canal, waiting for the gate to open. The canal was part of the lock system that made the wild Crow River navigable. The true river was a short distance through the stand of birch on the other side. Their dad used to take them to the rapids to hunt crayfish in the calmer eddies.

“Jake's dad said only an idiot would buy a boat like that,” Chris declared, resting his chin next to Joe's headrest, “Said it's like dumping money down a hole, just pissing it away.”

Chris's head jerked back as their father's elbow slammed into the seat back.

“Watch your mouth.”

That shut Chris up. He settled into his seat and started kicking Joe through the seat back with a rhythmic tap tap tapping. It was because of that habit that Chris still had to wear plastic bags on his feet whenever they drove to town. Scuffs on the soft red leather infuriated their dad, but the little idiot couldn't stop kicking any more than he could keep his mouth closed for a full minute.

Their father had bought the '78 T-bird—his first new car—the year before. He'd gotten promoted to drying section foreman at the paper mill, and a car like that, he said, gets a man respect. A boss needs to be respected. He cleaned the big car inside and out every week. Then the

mill closed. After that he rarely took it out of the driveway, but he cleaned it more often than ever. He spent most days drinking on the front porch, cussing at the pickups that drove too fast past their house; the dust they kicked up from the gravel road covered the car's white finish with a thin coat of grime. Eventually, he took to protecting the car with a tarp. He might have let it sit like that in the driveway all summer if their mother hadn't made him take the boys to the bridge.

The T-bird cruised past the lock. On their left, the short canal rejoined the river and the swift current preceded them into Mannford. On their right, pine forest gave way to clusters of aluminum-sided factory homes. The houses had been built to deal with an influx of mill workers a few decades earlier, and they were visibly suffering from the haste of their construction. Their lives had already been pushed beyond their allotted spans; they slumped inward, their foundations sunken into the hard-packed dirt. Inside the town limits, where River Road became Queen Street, the houses were older but better made, with facades of red brick or limestone.

Their dad slowed when they came upon a row of vehicles; dozens of cars were queued up on the dirt shoulder. The line stretched from the United Church all the way past Mannford Elementary.

“What's going on? What are they all doing?” Chris rolled down the window and stuck his head out.

“Sit down,” said their father, who was staring bleakly ahead at the beginning of the line—the Campbell Gulf gas station. “These idiots are panicking for nothing. They won't let the Pakis screw us again.” By “they,” Joe knew his father meant the Americans; he kept saying President Carter would have to step in in the Middle East—maybe put the Shah back in power—anything to keep this oil crisis from getting as bad as the last one.

“Jake's dad says he's gonna get a Japanese car. He says everyone's gonna start doing it.”

“Jake's dad is another idiot. It's all going to turn around.”

“Yeah, but he says it won't cuz—”

“Shut it.”

“—people are gonna—”

“You want to get out and walk?”

“No.”

“Then shut it.”

They soon reached the newly reopened Bridge Street intersection. The construction of the bridge had ended the day before to the great relief of the townsfolk, who had been forced to cross five miles downriver at Harrisford. Their father whistled appreciatively.

“Look at that. Ain't she something.”

The new bridge spanned the Crow River in a graceful white arc, its highest point offering twenty-four feet of clearance for passing boats. It had no steel beams or cables like other towns' bridges. It was solid concrete, but gleamed so brightly in the sun it could have been pure marble.

Their dad let them out in front of Memorial Park, next to the eastern abutment of the bridge.

"Go on," he said, sucking through his teeth, eyes fixed on the bridge. “Be at Clarke's Corner at four. At four—no dicking around.”

Chris pulled the bags off his feet and they got out. Memorial Park was just a small patch of grass circling a marble slab inscribed with the names of Mannford boys killed in both world wars. A group of high school kids were already there, mostly girls in bikinis stretched out on beach towels. They paid no attention to Joe and Chris; they were watching the spectacle happening over the water.

Boys in swimming trunks were hanging off the side of the arching bridge, clinging to the handrail. The smallest, youngest boys stayed close to the shore, jumping into the Crow from the lowest point. At the crown of the arch were the high school boys. They weren't leaping at all at the moment; they were waiting for a dredging barge to pass underneath. When it was gone, they exchanged shouts of "all clear" with boys on the other side. At that signal, they began to leap in one at a time. Most landed feet first, but the bolder ones dove. One managed a backward flip ending in a passable dive.

Joe didn't recognize any of the older kids in the park, except Lori, a slender brunette whose dad owned the auto wreckers down the road from their place. She was lying facedown on a towel, surrounded by other girls. Chris noticed her, too.

"Lori! Hey! Are you gonna jump? We're gonna jump."

She glanced up and rested her chin on her hands. "I think I'll lie here a bit. Hi, Joe."

"Hey." Joe couldn't think of anything else to say. "C'mon spaz."

"You're the spaz."

The boys slid out of their jeans and T-shirts and left them balled up at the base of the monument. They were already wearing their white swimming trunks. They circled back to the abutment at the intersection and started climbing the bridge's pedestrian walkway. Chris stuck his head over the railing and shouted down at Lori.

"Watch us jump, okay?!"

Lori squinted up at them, lifting a hand to shade her eyes. "Okay."

When she turned away, Joe smacked his palm hard against the back of Chris's head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

Joe shrugged and started walking again, shoving Chris ahead of him. The boys followed the sidewalk up the curving slope until they reached the spot where the younger boys were hanging off the thick railing.

“Stay here.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No, Dad said not too far out.”

“I jump as good as you. I’m a better swimmer, too.”

“Don’t argue with me. Just stay down here.”

“Don’t have to.”

“You do if you want to come back here. You know they won’t let you come alone.”

Joe left Chris and continued up the slope to the highest point, under which all the boat traffic passed. Some older boys still clung to the railing. Joe climbed over the guardrail and stood on the narrow concrete ledge. The nearest boy was wet from an earlier jump, his blond hockey hair clinging to the nape of his neck. He nodded at Joe. Joe didn’t know him; he’d only be starting high school in September. He nodded back.

Joe looked across the water. The mill was still there, a dreary collection of blocky concrete buildings sprawled along the waterfront. The only sign of its abandonment was the lack of smoke rising from its two great stacks. Joe’s dad had told him that the company that owned the mill was going to tear down those ugly buildings and build a huge marina in their place. Their only condition was that the town invest in projects to beautify the tiny downtown area. The new bridge had been the most controversial of these projects—the cost of demolishing and replacing the perfectly serviceable old bridge had seemed crazy to many—but now that it was complete everyone agreed that it really gave the town something special.

The old bridge had been functional but unattractive. It was a bascule bridge, a grim construction of rough concrete slabs with a steel middle section that lifted to allow pleasure boats to pass on their way from the Bay of Quinte to the northern cottage country. Their dad had ranted against it every time he'd been caught on the wrong side of the water when the bridge was up. The new bridge, he declared, would help turn things back around the right way. It was already featured on all the postcards in Mannford, which had never before had postcards of any sort. The new marina and attractive downtown area would entice summer boaters and campers to stop and spend their money. And the paper company would be sure to find positions for their top former employees. Their father imagined himself in charge of the new marine filling station or managing the dry dock. This new future, he said, was only possible because of the closure of the mill; it couldn't have happened at a better time. Of course, building the marina would take a while, so there might be a couple of lean years.

Joe had heard that demolished remnants of the old bridge remained deep below the surface of the Crow. Peering into the murk, he saw nothing but the last jumper floundering clumsily in the black water. In his mind he had a vivid picture of what he would see if the silty water ever ran clear—algae-covered slabs of concrete with bent and blasted stanchions jutting out like the rigging of an old hulk, a doomed galleon out of a history book. Of course nothing like that had ever sailed these waters. History, Joe knew, was made in other places.

“Boats! Hold on!” The cry from the far railing came half a minute before the first of the yachts passed underneath them, part of a procession traveling upriver to Lock 13. Joe looped an arm around the rail and watched as, one by one, the boats emerged from the bridge's noon shadow, flashing blinding white as they reentered the sunlight.

“Joe!” Joe turned toward the sound of Chris's voice. “Joe! Look!” Joe saw his brother standing on the ledge near the river wall, one hand grasping the rail, the other pinching his nose closed. Chris pushed away from the bridge and, keeping his body pencil-straight, fell into the river with hardly a splash.

“All clear!” At the cry, Joe turned back to see the wake of the last boat settling below him. The blond boy grinned at Joe and flung himself headfirst into the Crow. Joe waited for him to resurface and start swimming toward the park. When the boy was well clear, Joe turned his back against the guardrail. He'd only intended to jump, but he felt he could do no less than the blond boy. He bent his legs and took a deep breath. He hesitated a moment and then let himself fall forward with his arms outstretched to form a spear point. He regretted the action a moment later as the water rushed up toward him.

Blackness. And so cold. He panicked. His limbs flailed. He swam up, down, sideways—it was impossible to say, turned and twisted as he was. Finally, he broke the surface, gasping. Quickly orienting himself, he swam into the relative shelter of the nearest support column. The column's thick base rose a few feet out of the water. The new concrete was not yet slick with algae, and Joe was able to grasp the ledge. Sheltered from the current, he took a minute to catch his breath. He was relieved to see that he had swum in the direction of the park. When his breath came more easily, he kicked away from the column and made his way to the shore. The river wall was old and full of cracks, but so slippery that he was relieved when the blond boy appeared at the ledge and pulled him out.

“Thanks.”

“Sure. Name's Todd. What's yours?”

“Joe.”

Joe followed Todd to the monument, where other high school boys were talking to the girls. He sat down near Lori, who looked up and smiled.

“Nice dive.”

“Thanks.” Joe hadn't brought a towel and he was shivering badly, but he couldn't help grinning.

Lori sat up and glanced around. She looked at the bridge and then back at Joe.

“Where's your brother?”

The police alerted the operators at Lock 14 and soon had boats searching the rocks and pilings on both sides of the river. It took them three hours to find him. He was exactly where he had fallen, three feet below the surface of the river, unseen in the shadow of the bridge. He'd been skewered through the left thigh by a twisted spike of rusted rebar torn free from one of the old bridge's concrete stanchions. The swift current held him pinned there, his arms and right leg fluttering like the tatters of a ragged pennant.

The demolition company agreed to pay all the expenses for having the stanchion removed and having divers search for any other dangerous debris. Everyone agreed it was quite decent of them. No one was to blame, after all. It was terribly sad, but things like that happen. That's what the mayor said and the police chief agreed. The minister at the service said that not even God could be blamed; He lifts us up and casts us down, and His reasons are inscrutable.

As for Joe, there was no hint of reproach. No one even looked at him during the service, not that he could see from the front row. His father stood beside him, his face unreadable.

Somewhere nearby, a woman was weeping; this made Joe uncomfortable. Looking back, Joe could see faces he recognized: his school principal, Lori's father, some men from the mill who Joe's father would sometimes meet at the tavern. Grim and attentive, they faced the pulpit. They began nodding and murmuring assent at something the minister said. Joe turned back toward the pulpit. He hadn't been following the sermon, but he found himself nodding as well.

Joe's mother was staying with his aunt for a bit—she didn't say how long—so he and his father drove alone from the cemetery. On their way home, they caught a red light at the Bridge Street intersection. While the T-bird idled, Joe glanced over at his father and saw that the older man's gaze was fixed on the bridge. There was a weary tenseness about his father's face that Joe had never seen before. A faint tracery of lines radiated from his eyes—something new, like the first cracks in a dinged windshield. His father turned and looked at him for a moment as if he wanted to say something. Joe thought it might be important, so he waited quietly as they crossed the intersection and continued back along the river. Neither spoke as they passed Lock 13 and drove the length of the canal. When they got home, they sat in the car for a while, gazing at the silent house. Already, it was as if there had never been another boy living there. Finally they got out and Joe followed his father up the walkway. His father didn't think to cover the T-bird, and Joe didn't remind him.

The town council renamed Memorial Park after the president of the paper company. This annoyed Joe's father; the marina they built was a lot smaller than he'd expected, and he ended up taking a job at the poultry plant. Nothing worked out quite the way it was supposed to. The

marina remained mostly vacant, the postcards gathered dust, and the pleasure boats continued to pass under the bridge on their way from the Bay of Quinte to the northern cottage country.

OCEAN BOULEVARD

The rough gravel presses through my thin cotton shirt into the small of my back. With my head resting on my pack, I gaze into the almost featureless blue sky. Nothing there except the noonday sun and two high-flying hawks. They're circling above me, probably waiting for rodents to leave the shelter of the tall, dry grass on either side of the road.

I take another drag of my second-to-last joint. It's almost the end of the Mexican brickweed I picked up in Miami. Shitty pot sells for almost as much as coke down here.

I close my eyes for a while—I don't know how long. I imagine I'm one of these crushed stones packed into the rough shoulder of the road. My world is reduced to the most basic sensations: the baking sun above, the slightly cooler ground below, the occasional vibration of a passing car. No drivers slow down at the sight of my prone body, not even out of morbid curiosity. I wouldn't really expect them to.

I open my eyes. The two birds are still soaring above. Together, the pattern they trace is a figure eight. They've been doing it for a while, staking out this stretch of highway. Slowly, I begin to get the impression that it's not the road they're circling but me. I squint up at them. It's too far to tell, but I'm suddenly sure they're not hawks but turkey buzzards—up there waiting for the road to kill me. I grab a handful of gravel and pitch it at them. Some of it lands on my face. *Stupid.* Blinking and spitting out grit, I lurch to my feet.

There's not much around. Just asphalt in four directions where the 806 meets Highway 1 outside of Boca Raton. I thought the whole coast of Florida was hotels and parking lots, but my

last ride left me here. No buildings, no shade. No cars willing to pick me up. I can't blame them. I know what I look like.

A car approaches and I stick out my thumb. I smile and try to meet the driver's eyes. No luck. Shrug. I flip him off and start walking. A few minutes later, a pickup slows down. I quickly look it over; it's loaded with grapefruits. Pass. I wave it on. Just one of the rules I follow when I'm on the road: never get into a truck with any kind of fruit—apples, oranges, doesn't matter. They're not going far, and they'll want to pull off the main road. Never let them pull off the main road.

An hour later, I regret my decision. Every car that passes is a Mercedes or Lexus or Porsche. Cars like that don't stop—ever.

I've decided to light my last joint when a silver Jaguar passes and then starts to decelerate. It stops a couple hundred feet away and starts backing up.

I pinch the burning tip off my joint and tuck the rest away in an Altoids tin. I watch the Jag approach. It's by far the nicest car that's ever stopped for me. I amuse myself for a moment imagining that it's Superdriver, but of course that's impossible. When it pulls up, I see the driver is a guy in his twenties, like me. I get into the front seat with my pack between my legs—never put your bag in the trunk—and close the door. Thank Christ for air conditioning. The cool leather upholstery feels good against my back.

I look the guy over. He's pink-skinned and fleshy, with the kind of complexion that never tans. He smiles nervously as he checks me out. I know right away what kind of ride this is. *Oh well*. These tend to be short rides once you've turned the guy down.

“Where are you headed?” he asks, shifting into first. His voice is kind of high-pitched and quavery.

“New Smyrna,” I say. The lie is a habit more than a rule. You don't have to lie about where you're going, only why.

“What's up there?” he asks.

What's it to you, sissy? “My sister,” I say. “I'm just going for a visit.” Wherever you say you're going, there should be someone waiting for you, someone who'll miss you. That's just good sense.

“Are you from around here?” he asks. *Good.* It's good to keep the small talk going for as long as possible.

“No, I'm Canadian.”

“Toronto?”

“Yeah.” A small lie, but just to avoid confusion; a lot of Americans don't know any cities in Canada except for Toronto and Montreal. “You?”

“I live in Miami. I'm just driving up to see my father.”

We go on like this for a while. Boring stuff. His name is Adam, he lives alone, he doesn't like the beach. His voice is getting on my nerves.

“What do you do?” I ask.

“This and that.”

“We got that in common.” *Sure we do.* This and that doesn't buy a Jag. This guy's no dealer; he's from money.

The guy—Adam—tells me he prefers to drive up Ocean Boulevard when he's not in a big hurry. I'm okay with that; the roads run parallel along the coast. We cut toward the water at Boynton Beach. We get on Ocean and continue north along a narrow strip of land separated from the mainland by the ICW.

After a while, there's a lull in the conversation. I sink back into the seat and gaze out the window. The road takes us past car lots and golf courses and tidy white bungalows with tidy front lawns. I wonder how they keep the grass so green in this heat. Soon bigger houses are flashing past. I can't see their lawns; they're hidden behind stonework walls. Behind some of the walls I can see tacky statuary and fountains. The facades of a lot of these houses have white columns that clearly aren't structural. What kind of idiot puts in columns that don't hold anything up?

I realize I've been staring out the window too long. I didn't notice my last joint creep up on me. I look over. Adam is looking at me. Like he did when I got in the car. I try to think of something to say to head him off, but my mind is too sluggish.

“Hey, I'm probably going to stop at Sydney's Garden Spa later,” he says really casually. “Do you ever go to spas?”

Shit. Too late. I think about how best to answer.

“My girlfriend always tries to get me to go to one, but it's not really my style.”

Adam looks away and fixes his eyes on the road.

“That's cool. I was just asking, you know, cuz ... it's a good one and not really expensive. You should try it sometime.”

We drive in silence for a few minutes. I see we're coming up on a traffic light. I figure there must be a town up ahead, which is bad news if I have to get out here. The only ones who'll pick you up in a rich town are the cops.

“Where did you say you were going?” asks Adam. He slows for the light, which has turned yellow.

“New Smyrna.”

“I'm not going that far.”

“No worries. I'm just glad you stopped. The sun was getting to me out there. I even thought you might be Superdriver.”

Adam just looks at me. I realize I'm talking stoned. I go with it.

“You know, the Superdriver of the Golden West. She drives a really nice car like this one. She stops to pick up every hitcher she sees. And she's hot—I mean smoking hot. Tits out to here. Great face. Long blond hair. As soon as you get in, she rolls you a fatty—she does it one-handed like a trucker. She plays music you like. She likes to talk about everything you like to talk about. And if it's a long trip, she'll pay for a motel room. You can fuck her if you want. She'll even buy you breakfast ... Only thing is, she only passes when you're in the bushes taking a piss.”

Adam doesn't say anything for a second. Then he laughs.

“So she's like a hitchhiker legend?”

“Exactly like that.”

The light turns green. We keep driving. I fish the Altoids tin out of my back pocket.

“Mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead.”

I crack open the window and shake my burnt-down joint out of the tin.

“Is that pot?”

“You want?”

I light it and pass it over. We smoke it down together and I put the roach back in the tin.

We hit a long stretch with not much of anything except palm trees. Must be a park. I don't ask; the joint killed the chatter and I'm enjoying the silence and the view of the ocean.

We make it to Palm Beach. At the first red light, Adam pulls out a little glass vial and takes off the screw cap. Then he takes out one of those little coke-spoons-I-mean-coffee-stirrers they give away at McDonald's, but get this—it's made of silver. Funny stuff. He snorts some and hands it to me.

If you're used to the coke you get in Canada, you have to be careful down here. Ours is mostly lidocaine and baking soda. The stuff Adam gives me surely hasn't passed through more than one pair of hands since landing on a Miami dock stuffed inside a mackerel. I take what I think is a cautious snort.

Ping!

Adam's all right!

“Wait a second,” I say. “If you had tits, you'd be Superdriver!”

We're laughing now and he's telling me all about some of the crazy buildings we're passing. There are Spanish Colonial mansions next to geometric architectural puzzles made entirely of glass, then we pass one that's a magical fucking fairy castle with crenelated towers and a moat—a moat!

“That's fucking awesome!” I say. “But who'd want to live there?”

“No one does. I mean, not all the time. If you can afford to live in Palm Beach, you live in other places too. And most of these houses get knocked down after a few years.”

“Wow. Just like that?”

“They're concept houses and, like jokes, they get old pretty quickly.”

“It's like they don't even know what money is, here.” I'm a bit awed. It's both wonderful and pathetic.

Adam nods. For a while he says nothing.

“They know what it is,” he says finally. “They just have a different idea of what it's for.”

We stop talking for a while. We arrive at a busy intersection, and Adam gets into the left turn lane.

“I have to stop here, but if you stay with me for a bit, I'll take you the rest of the way.”

I never let a ride get off the main road, but it's a good offer and I reckon the rule doesn't apply to a place like this. We drive up the red-cobbled avenue. The wide sidewalks glisten white in the bright sun except where lush palms sprout at regular intervals. We pass shops with names like Tiffany, Chanel, and Cartier. The place has a make-believe quality, like Disney World, except it's even cleaner and there're more cops than people. We stop in front of a place called Christie's. Adam snorts another spoonful and passes me the gear. A valet comes out to meet us and Adam gets out and takes a ticket.

“I can stay in the car,” I say. I bend over like I'm tying my shoe so I can get a noseful without being too obvious.

“No, come with me. There'll be free drinks.”

Feeling very aware of my filthy shorts and three-week beard, I get out and join Adam in the vestibule. We continue into a large room full of people. Traceries of white and gold cover the walls and the high ceiling. Rows of chairs have been set up, but at the moment everyone is milling around looking at paintings on the walls and other art objects on display tables. Adam vanishes into the crowd and I find an unoccupied space against the wall.

I'm out of place and I hate it. The smell of perfume is so intense that I'm not worried about how I smell, but everyone here is dressed for the opera or something, and I'm dressed to mow one of their lawns. I can see the free drinks; smartly dressed servers are carrying them around on trays, but none look my way. In fact, everyone is very definitely not looking at me.

Adam returns with a glass of white wine in each hand. I'm not a wine drinker, but I'm not fussy either. I take one.

"I don't see him," Adam says, craning his neck to peek through the crowd. He's scrunching up his face and clenching his jaw. I wonder if I'm as obviously cranked as he is.

"Who?"

"My father."

"Is he supposed to be here?"

"He should be."

Adam waves to a blond woman walking by and walks over to speak to her. I follow some distance behind. The woman's gown has a deeply scooping neckline that shows off a very impressive pair of tits, but there's something oddly repulsive about her face. Even I can see that she's had some serious plastic surgery done. Her skin is taut and her eyes and mouth are stretched out and distorted. She smiles at Adam, revealing large, perfectly straight teeth and far too much gum. Instead of a fifty-year-old woman, she looks like a forty-year-old ghoul. Nice tits though.

"Where's my father, Diane?"

"I don't know, Adam."

"They're selling a Rothko. He always tries to pick up Rothkos."

"Well, he never mentioned it. I'll tell him you were here if I see him."

"No, don't. That's not necessary. Thanks, Diane."

She leaves and Adam just stands there thinking. I guess the coke has hit me hard because I'm hopping from foot to foot and I'm holding an empty glass I don't remember drinking from. I set the glass on a display table, and a server instantly appears to scoop it up. So they *are* watching.

“So what are we doing?” I ask. The words come out tight and clipped. I feel like I'm on display. *Why's he brought me here?*

“Let's get out of here,” Adam says. “You want this?”

He hands me his untouched glass. I toss it back.

“Let's go.”

We pick up the car and get back onto Ocean Boulevard.

“Just one more stop. Then I'll take you to New Smyrna.”

“No, just leave me anywhere. I'll be fine.”

“No, I'll take you there. I just want to stop at his house.”

“But he's not expecting you, right?”

“Please, just one more stop.”

I could insist that he drop me off. I don't feel like being a part of whatever this is.

“Please.”

“Fine.”

We pull up to the gate of a large walled estate. We wait with the engine idling until the gate opens slightly. A man in white slacks and a white Polo shirt walks out and comes to Adam's window. He's wearing a discrete headset plugged into a walkie transceiver on his belt. Hanging from the other side of the belt is a holstered pistol. *Americans*. The guy stoops down and looks us both over. He may be dressed for a croquet match, but even without the weapon and the tats on his forearms, it would be obvious he's military or ex-military. He's got the look.

“Hello, Adam. We weren't expecting you.” His manner is polite, but not quite friendly.

“I don't need an invitation.” Adam sounds defensive, jittery.

The Polo guy nods and steps away from the car. He talks quietly into his headset and waits a minute for a response. Finally he nods. The gate opens the rest of the way and he waves us through.

We see the house now. It's what Adam described before as Spanish Colonial. The white two-story building has large verandas on both levels. As we drive up, I see another man in a white Polo standing with his hands resting on the second-floor railing.

We park at the front entrance. Adam gets out and opens the front door without knocking. I follow him into the entry hall, which is actually more like a large antechamber with sofas, chairs and a liquor cabinet. There is a single set of double doors leading deeper into the house. The doors open and a middle-aged woman steps through to meet us. She's wearing a tan pantsuit and her steel-grey hair is tied back in a bun. She is thick-bodied with a plump face, but there's nothing soft about her.

"Your father is very busy today. You should have called." She turns to me with hard eyes. "And who are you?"

"He's with me, Irene," Adam says quickly. "Tell Dad we're here to see him."

"He knows you're here, but he doesn't know this person. And he's very, very busy."

"Then tell him we'll wait," Adam says, sounding more querulous than authoritative. He waves me toward a sofa near the liquor cabinet. "Have a seat. I'll make us some drinks."

Irene stares coldly at me. Once again, I feel as if I'm on display. Adam has brought me here for some reason I can't work out. But this bitch is pissing me off. I sit.

"Scotch OK?"

"Yeah," I say.

"He has Laphroaig and Macallan."

“The first one.”

Irene is still standing there, but Adam doesn't glance at her. He pours the drinks and sits beside me. Eventually, she seems to decide that she can't make us go away by looming.

“Wait here,” she says and disappears through the doors.

I look over at Adam. He's staring down at his drink. I see that his hand is shaking. I don't know what's going on, but I'm pretty sure it's not going to end well for this guy. Minutes pass and he's not talking. I finish my scotch—it's really amazingly good—and get up to pour another. While I drink it, I look around. There are no books to hint at the person who lives here. There are paintings on the walls, but they're abstract modern junk—expensive junk, I'm sure. I notice security cameras high up in opposite corners of the room. Remembering the Polo goons outside, I'm not tempted to grab anything.

Irene returns, quietly closing the doors behind her. Adam stands to meet her and she hands him a thick envelope.

“This is for you. He's far too busy to see you now, but this should hold you until Christmas.”

“I don't need it. I want to see him. I won't take much of his time.” His voice cracks.

Oh fuck, now he's crying.

“That's not possible,” she says. “There's twenty thousand dollars there. You should take it and leave. You should come at Christmas ... alone.”

“I don't want his money.” He looks up at a security camera. “I don't want your fucking money! Come down and see me!” He goes to the doors and tries the handles. Finding them locked, he steps back. “Open it.” There's no force in his voice, no hope that he'll be obeyed.

Irene says nothing. She just stares at him, then at the front entryway, where the Polo goon from the gate is now standing. She shakes her head and the guy takes up a position beside the door. The two of them stare at Adam, who's standing there sobbing, his face crumpled and miserable.

I don't know why I do it. No one would call me sentimental and I don't appreciate being included in this family disaster. Maybe it's that nobody's on his side. Or maybe it's just to say “fuck you too” to the man behind the camera. Anyway, I reach over to that weepy gay boy and put my arm around his shoulder. He leans into me, which is a bit much, but I hold his shaking body while the goon and the old bitch look on. And somewhere up above us, the cold motherfucker is staring down at us.

After a minute, I lead him out of the house and back to the car. The goon follows us out and he murmurs something. It's quiet but I'm pretty sure I hear “faggots.” I shrug. Never argue with a guy with a gun. That's just good sense.

I set Adam in the passenger seat and he hands me the keys. I drive us out of there and head north on Ocean. I guess I'm kind of drunk because I have a bit of trouble staying in my lane. Adam sits there sniffing for a long time, so I keep driving. Eventually, he seems to fall asleep, or maybe he just doesn't want to talk. Fine with me. I'll see how far I get before he tells me to stop. For now, I keep driving.

SWEET

Dan is out with his friends again, so I'm glad when Mandy calls me. It'll be a girls' night just like we used to have. No cooking tonight. We'll order sushi, sit on the balcony, and catch up. It's been so long.

“I'll pick up the sushi on the way over,” she says. “Do you know what you want?”

“They make some with fried chicken.”

“Gross! Oh, right—you're still nursing.”

“Yeah, no raw fish for me.”

“Okay. See you at seven.”

That's two hours from now, and the apartment is in no fit state. I open all the windows, letting in the early summer air along with the noise and fumes of the rush hour traffic. I move through the kitchen, sweeping used Kleenex and balled-up diapers into a trash bag. I've just started on the sink full of lunch dishes when Scott starts bawling. *Of course he'd choose today to have a short nap.* I keep washing the dishes; Mom always says I spoil him by not letting him cry it out. I try to ignore him, but soon his crying turns into shrieking—it cuts through my brain. I run into the nursery and sweep him into my arms.

“Shh, baby. Mommy's here. Shh. Shh.” His little face is bright red and streaked with tears, and his tiny hands clutch desperately at my blouse. *Let a baby cry, she says ... Mom and her stupid theories.* I coo down at Scott until he calms down a bit. I go back into the kitchen, but there's not much I can do with him hanging off me. I decide to call Dan.

“Hi, this is Dan's phone. Dan's screening his calls right now, so if he doesn't call you back, please take the hint. *Beep.*” He's had the same stupid message since college. I thought it was funny when we started dating, but it seems so childish now. I've told him it's time to change it, but he keeps it to spite me.

“Hi, it's me. Mandy's coming over for supper. It would be great if you could come home a bit early, so I can go out with her later. Call me, okay?” Scott is whimpering and sucking hard on his fist. “Scott, you can't be hungry yet.” He starts crying again. “Fine.”

I bring him to the living room and settle in the rocking chair. I give him my fullest breast, but he's too upset to take it properly. “Open your mouth, Scott. Wider.” I pry his jaw open with my fingers and push my nipple into his mouth. He bites down. *Oh God, it hurts.* I groan and stamp my foot. The constant feeding has left my nipples raw and fissured. There's never time for them to heal, to toughen like they're supposed to do. He finally takes the nipple properly; his mouth is wide enough and the angle is just right. This is as good as it gets—a constant gnawing pain.

The phone rings. I left it in the kitchen, but I'm not about to go get it. I wait for Scott to finish before going to check my messages. *Damn it.* It was Mandy, not Dan. “Hi, Anne. I hope you don't mind if I bring a friend. I know you'll like her. See you.”

Since when does she have friends I don't know? I'm not in the mood for strangers and the house is still a mess. I can't do anything about it now, I decide, not without sounding like a bitch. I try to put Scott back in his crib, but he squawks in protest. Holding him in one arm, I do my best to finish cleaning the kitchen. When my arm feels like it's about to fall off, I try putting Scott down again. This time he seems content to lie there chewing the ear of his plush bunny. That gives me the chance to call Mom. There's no answer, so I let it ring. She's the only person I know

who doesn't have voicemail. She says that if it's important, people will call back. *As if we don't have anything better to do.* After a while, I hang up. It's probably pointless talking to her anyway. She's the one who decides when her little visits happen.

At a quarter past seven, Mandy buzzes me from the lobby. I buzz her in, then run through the house, picking up clothes and spritzing each room with Febreze. No time to deal with the toys on the living room floor. I kick them into a corner and throw Scott's blankie over them. A knock on the door—I hear laughter coming from the other side. I open it. Mandy is standing there with a tall, pretty blonde with tight curls. They're both dressed for going out: short skirts, tight dresses, high boots, make-up. I realize I'm still wearing the mismatched blouse and sweatpants I put on this morning.

“Welcome. Come on in. Sorry the place is such a mess,” I say, keeping my tone light.

“You should see my place,” laughs the blonde, stepping into the foyer. Mandy and I hug. She stinks of booze and cigarettes. I didn't use to mind the smell, but now it makes me faintly nauseous. “Hi, I'm Kathy,” says the blonde and hands me a bottle of wine. They've each brought one.

“Oh, you didn't have to,” I say.

“No, we really did.” More laughter. They stand around the kitchen island and I bring out a corkscrew and two glasses.

“Go on, Anne,” Mandy says, “have some.”

“I wish I could,” I say, “but you know I'm nursing.”

“Have a little, just to taste,” Kathy says. “I did sometimes when I was nursing. French women do it all the time.” I look doubtfully at her taut belly and large, firm breasts. She doesn't look like a mother in that dress—more like a prostitute, I decide.

“That's France,” I say. I sound tetchy. I force a smile and take out another glass. I pour for the others and put a splash in my own glass. “Just a taste.”

“To Anne,” Kathy says, raising her glass. “Thanks for having us.”

Scott starts crying. I apologize and go to his room. He's lost his pacifier. I put it back in his mouth, and he spits it out again. I pick him up and rock him for a few minutes. He stops fussing, but he's looking up at me with wide, alert eyes. I carry him into the main bedroom and call Dan again. “Hi, it's me. I could really use your help. Please call me.” I bring Scott out to the kitchen. The table has been set and the sushi placed in the center on my largest serving dish. The others are sitting there chatting, but stop when I enter.

“Oh my God! He's gorgeous! How old is he?”

“Five months.”

“Such a handsome boy! Yes you are!” Kathy leans in and makes kissy faces at Scott, who starts laughing. “Look! He's smiling at me!”

“He's so sweet,” Mandy says, smiling, “like his mama.”

“I think he takes after Dan,” I say.

“But you were always the sweet one.”

“Not always,” I say—a bit sharply, I think, so I soften it with a smile.

“Really?” says Kathy, giggling. “Tell us. When weren't you sweet?”

“There were times,” I say. They're both smiling at me, waiting for me to say something clever or saucy. I try to think of something, but the moment stretches on for too long. “Before I met Dan, there were times. Isn't that right, Mandy?” Before she can answer, I suggest that we eat the sushi before it gets cold. That gets a bigger laugh than it should have. Everyone sits and starts trying to identify the choices.

“Oh, no!” says Mandy. “I forgot your chicken maki. I’m so sorry. I don’t know how I forgot.”

“You were probably—” *Already drunk*, I almost say. “You were probably just distracted. There are so many choices there. But look—this roll just has avocado, I think. Leave me that one.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’ll be fine with that.”

I’ve only eaten one piece when Scott gets fussy again. I have to stand and start walking to calm him. The others stop eating. “Don’t wait for me, or you might never eat,” I say, trying to smile. While I circle the kitchen island, they eat, laughing and talking. I try at first to follow the conversation, but they’re talking about people I’ve never met. I find myself humming and gazing down into Scott’s enormous blue eyes. Soon he starts pursing his lips and making wet noises. “No, Scott. You just ate. You can’t be hungry yet.” As if to refute this, he shoves a fist into his mouth and starts sucking on it. I groan and, holding him in one arm, drag the rocking chair in from the living room. I sit and give him my other breast. I wince as he takes the nipple in his mouth. “I don’t know what’s wrong. I fed him two hours ago,” I say.

“It’s probably just a growth spurt,” Kathy says. “He’ll be hungrier than usual for a few days or a week.”

“Maybe it’s a good time to switch him to formula,” I say.

“Oh, don’t do that! There have been all sorts of studies about it. If you want your baby to have a strong immune system, he has to have breast milk. Every month you nurse him makes him stronger. I nursed mine for over a year.”

But did it hurt you, bitch? I think, suddenly furious. *Did your baby chew your fake tits into ground beef?*

“I miss that so much,” she continues. “It’s impossible to explain the feeling to anyone who’s not a mother. There’s such a close connection with the baby. It’s so peaceful.” She smiles down at Scott beatifically. Sour resentment twists in my belly.

“I know what you mean,” I say. I don’t know if my anger is showing, so I look down at Scott. He, at least, is now calm and peacefully suckling. He lays his small hand above my breast, a gesture very like an embrace. Despite the pain, I feel myself slowly relaxing. Soon he falls asleep with my nipple in his mouth. I let him rest there, and with my eyes closed I gently rock us both in the chair. The others finish eating. Kathy uncorks the second bottle and refills their glasses.

“Do you want me to hold him while you eat?” Mandy asks me, reaching for her glass.

“That’s all right. I had a big lunch. I’ll finish later.”

The others talk in the kitchen for a while, then refill their glasses and move out onto the balcony. I’m comfortable where I am, but I don’t want to seem inhospitable. I already feel like I’m spoiling the evening. I stand and join them, dragging the rocking chair behind me. The balcony is long but narrow. The chair takes a lot of space, so I place it to one side. The others are leaning on the railing, laughing. Mandy has just finished telling a story.

“Two guys in one night!” Kathy laughs. “You skank!”

“Takes one to know one. Anyway, I only kissed them.”

“Maybe you’ll do better tonight. Hey, there’s a couple guys now.” Kathy leans out over the railing and shouts down at the street. “Hey, boys! Where’re you going?! My friend here wants to know 'cuz she’s really, really h—” Mandy pulls her back, laughing. I’ve never been so

embarrassed. We're only five floors up. There's no doubt they heard her. They must think we're all drunken sluts.

Scott wakes up crying. Kathy bends down and strokes his head. "I'm sorry, honey. Did we wake you up? There there." His wailing intensifies. "Oops. He's really upset. Listen, we should get out of your hair. I'll just use your bathroom before we go."

Kathy goes back inside. I hold Scott close to my breast and caress his hair until he calms down. I look up at Mandy. She is fishing a cigarette out of her purse. I feel a familiar twinge of guilt; I introduced her to tobacco back in college. We spent many evenings drinking cheap beer and blowing smoke out our dorm window.

"Remember the time ..." I say. Mandy cocks her head toward me. "Remember when Dan and I took a break in third year and I let Derek Horner hold my thigh in statistics class? For the whole class, with Dan right there two rows behind." Mandy nodded. "That was pretty rotten of me, wasn't it? I mean, I could be rotten sometimes."

Mandy hesitates, then shrugs. "I guess so," she says, just as Kathy returns from the bathroom.

"Ready?" says Kathy. Mandy nods and they move towards the balcony door.

"Where are you going tonight?" I ask.

"There are a few good clubs near here," Mandy says. "I don't know which we'll hit first." She pauses. "It'd be great if you could come, but ..."

"Maybe next time," I say. "We'll have to do this again."

"Definitely."

"It was really nice meeting you," says Kathy.

I see them to the door, shaking Scott gently with every step. When they've gone, I carry him back outside to the balcony and sit in the rocking chair. I sit there listening to the sounds from the street far below. Rising above the hum of traffic are shouts and catcalls and the laughter of early evening revelers. After a while, Scott starts making sucking noises.

“Again, Scott? Really?”

I pull open my blouse. My breast feels like an empty change purse and I'm worried that I don't have enough milk for him. The nipple is still red and raw from the last feeding. Scott takes it in his mouth and bites down on the tip. I choke back a scream of pain and for a moment I feel something that is not love for this pale thing that clings to me. Whimpering, I work his jaw open and insert the nipple fully into his mouth. When he finally takes it properly, I sit back, close my eyes, and rock gently.

After a few minutes, I get a cramp in my thigh. I shift on the rocking chair, and Scott pulls away slightly and bites down hard. This time I do scream and a red flash flickers through my mind—an image—I see my hands as if they were the hands of a stranger, thrusting Scott away from me with violent force, out past the balcony railing, into the void. A jolt of adrenaline—with a gasp, I clutch at the air in front of me. But no, Scott's still here in my lap. It never happened.

I squeeze Scott so hard against my breast that he starts to cry again.

SHOTS IN THE AFTERNOON

A crowd of curious onlookers clustered around the window of a Japanese restaurant, interrupting the pedestrian traffic on Avenue du Parc. A young man, out for a stroll and unencumbered by work and life responsibilities, allowed himself to be drawn into the outer fringe of gawkers.

“What is it?” he asked of no one in particular.

A tiny old Greek woman tugged at his shirt and pointed through the wall of backs in front of her.

“Look there.”

The young man was tall enough to peer between the heads of those in front. Everyone was looking at the window. The window stretched to the ceiling of the restaurant interior and from the entrance to the dining room wall. The bottom half was partially frosted with an impressionistic image of a mountain overlooking a small lake. In the middle of the lake, a young woman in a rowboat was leaning out to gaze at her reflection in the water. It was a still scene.

“Beautiful,” said the young man.

“No, look there.”

In the clear glass representing the lake, there were six small holes whitened and cracked around their edges.

“A man comes,” said the woman. “Crazy on drugs. Bang bang bang! Like that.” She tugged on his shirt again. “I see. Another man is inside. He's eating sushi. Then bang bang bang! Dead.”

“Eating sushi?” asked the young man.

“Yes, then dead.”

The frosted glass of the wooded lake shore filled the bottommost section of window, shielding the victim's body from the crowd's curiosity.

“Must be a new place. Do you know if they deliver?”

The woman shrugged and turned to another new arrival, who was craning his neck to see what everyone was looking at.

“They deliver,” said a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit.

“Any good?”

“Not bad for Montreal. The lady?” The man gestured toward the Greek woman. “She didn't see anything. Heard it, maybe. She's got the 'bang bang bang.' Me, I saw it. It was two guys. They did it and took off running in different directions. I heard the guy inside was a big mafioso. It was some kind of hit.”

“How much do you think you'd get for something like that?”

“A hit? Dunno. You'd probably have to hook up with an outfit. Freelance work is a grind. You spend all your time looking for your next client.”

A long-haired Jesus-looking fellow with a guitar strapped to his back turned to face them. “That's not what I saw,” he said. “It was a boy and a girl. They shot through the window and ran off together. They did it for love.” The young man was impressed with the conviction in Jesus' voice, but the man in the suit was inclined to argue.

“Then who was the man eating sushi?” he demanded.

“Maybe a mafioso, as you say,” Jesus said. “Maybe her abusive husband. Maybe both.”

Just then a pair of policemen arrived and shouted at everyone to stand away from the window.

The gawkers spilled into the street, blocking southbound traffic, but, invested with a license similar to that of festivals and street sales, no one seemed inclined to leave. They stood there chatting and arguing over theories while police sirens and squealing tires sounded from side streets. Soon a smiling man in an apron came out of the restaurant carrying a large tray filled with assorted maki, which was very well received, most of the onlookers belonging to the late lunch crowd. Some took the opportunity to pump the chef for inside information.

“No, No. No one is dead,” he said. “It’s a practical joke. Very funny!”

“Is that blood?” asked a woman, pointing at some dark spots on his white apron.

“Ha ha ha! Take a menu. Please come again. Ten percent off for counter pickup!”

No one took the chef’s version seriously, but he was so pleasant and genial that his interrogators relaxed and contented themselves with debating the rumours circulating through the crowd. The drug-crazed maniac theory, through the Greek woman’s determined efforts, proved resilient. The Mafia-hit idea was widely considered the most plausible by virtue of being so common. Jesus, however, won over a surprising number of adherents, so much so that the general feeling was mixed when word came that the police had cornered the shooters in a back alley.

The police cordoned off a pair of side streets, Jeanne-Mance and Esplanade, from Bernard to Van Horne. Those onlookers without jobs to return to took up new positions at the cafes on Bernard. They sipped beer and lattes while patrol cars zipped up and down the two streets and the alley between them, creating an inescapable dragnet for the homicidal drug fiend—or the hired killers or the doomed lovers. This went on for some time, and the young man, sitting with several new friends, gradually lost interest in the spectacle. There was a soccer

game on the screen and an afternoon special on tequila shots, so no one noticed when the police cars disappeared.

The young man never heard if any suspects had been captured or indeed if there was truly any victim. He considered watching the evening news or picking up the paper the following day, but he decided against either action, knowing that, while the police would present a version of events that adhered to the available facts, they would disregard its beauty relative to other possible theories. For his part, the young man decided to believe the motive was love. He hoped the boy and girl were still at large. He imagined them still in that same alley, flitting like ghosts from shadow to shadow, living on food left on window sills by kind strangers, keeping their love alive in a hostile world.

THE CONSCRIPT

I wake up sweating. The sun is lighting up the sky but hasn't yet touched the Old City. I'm lying on the roof of the Black Tearoom—the cheapest accommodations in town. Twenty shekels a nights for a ratty hammock under a sheet of corrugated metal. Eight for a dirty mat on a patch of concrete exposed to the sky. I chose to save twelve shekels. It never rains on Jerusalem anyway.

It's hot already, but it's not the heat that woke me. A wild cacophony is bouncing off the high walls of the neighbouring buildings—the call to prayer is blaring out from God knows how many minarets, as it does five times a day, answered, as always, by a thousand church bells racing to reach heaven first. I've gotten used to the holy racket—it's telling me now that it's time to wander down into the souk to get some breakfast.

The Armenian pilgrims who arrived yesterday are sprawled across every visible surface of the roof. I carefully step over them and walk down the narrow stairwell into the little restaurant below. I move quietly past the kitchen, where Lazlo, the cook, is still sleeping, then through the little dining room. I grab a copy of *The Jerusalem Post* at the front desk before ducking past the low doorway leading out into the souk.

The cobbled passage is no wider than eight feet here. The “shops” are nothing more than shallow recesses in the ancient walls, enough room in each for a man to sit cross-legged next to a short table crowded with wares. My favourite shopkeeper is facing the wall, performing salah. I read the paper while waiting for him to finish his prayers and prostrations. As always, I scan the articles, looking for any mention of Zivah. Nothing again. She's moved from the front page to

oblivion in less than two weeks. If the world has forgotten her, maybe it's forgotten me. No, I'd be stupid to think so.

The shopkeeper rolls up his prayer mat, and I buy pita bread, baba ghanoush, and two hardboiled eggs. Three shekels. Suddenly, there's shouting from both ends of the passageway. On one side, half a dozen Arab men are jabbering angrily at three soldiers who are walking from the other direction. Like all Israeli soldiers with patrol duties, they're just kids, nineteen- and twenty-year-olds serving their three years before university. One of the boys is nervously fingering his submachine gun. Another shouts something back at the men in Hebrew. I lean back into the shop, trying to make myself two dimensional. The shopkeeper barks something at me. I shrug and crack open an egg, flinging the shell pieces out into the street. I pop the whole egg into my mouth and wait for the confrontation to end. A man in the shop facing me has assumed a similar posture. He's short, wearing expensive-looking slacks and a long-sleeved shirt that doesn't hide his powerful build. Our eyes meet. He looks away, too casually.

Don't react. The voice in my mind sounds like Ari's, but I haven't heard from him since that night, thank God. Still, the advice is sound—there's no way to know if the man knows I've marked him. How did they find me? My heart is racing—too fast. I close my eyes and run through the breathing exercise Mother taught me, the one I use to calm my nerves before getting on the ice. In moments my breathing steadies, and I open my eyes. The short man is now pretending to follow the exchange between the two groups, swinging his head as if he's watching a tennis match. Under my breath, I count to ten, and then push away from the shop's inner wall and into the street. With measured steps, I walk past the Black Tearoom and through the crowd of shouting Arabs, who step aside, never taking their eyes off the soldiers. They close ranks behind me and I start running.

No streets built since Roman times twist like the streets of the Arab Quarter. A left and a right, and I'm already hopelessly lost. Eventually I'll happen upon one of the seven gates, so I keep running. The souk is more crowded here. I twist to avoid a pair of boys running in the opposite direction, and I slip on a paving stone slick with some unidentifiable filth. I fall hard and feel pain shoot up from my right knee. I rise and turn to curse the children, but they're long gone.

I see an even narrower passage branching off to the left. I start down it, but I'm limping now—I need to hide. I duck into a darkened doorway. It's a coffeehouse. It's nearly empty at this hour, but the air is already heavy with sweet sheesha smoke. Two very old men are sitting on cushions in the centre of the small room. A hookah rests between them on a short table. Ignoring the men, I press my back against the wall next to the doorway and take a thick bootlace out of my pocket. I twine the ends around my hands and cross my forearms in front of me; an ex-legionnaire staying at the Tearoom showed me the correct way to garrote a man and I paid a rose seller ten shekels to let me practice on him. I try to slow my breathing as I listen for my pursuer. Nothing.

I wait a full five minutes. Then I peer through the doorway and cautiously step out onto the street. I take five steps. Something strikes me behind my left knee and I stumble. I never see my attacker, only the inside of the filthy sack he slips over my head.

I wake up sweating, alerted by the sound of footsteps outside my six by eight cell. At the unmistakable rattle of keys, I push myself up until I'm sitting on the narrow cot—actually a slab

of concrete covered with an exercise mat. The only parts of the room not made of concrete are the toilet and the tiny sink, both stainless steel. There are no windows or other openings, except two small vents near the ceiling and the shuttered door slot they pass my meals through. Everything, even the toilet bowl and the bedsheet, is remarkably clean. It's not so different from the hospital, except there I'd been allowed—encouraged—to take exercise out in the courtyard. Here my only exercise is the short walk between my cell and the interrogation room.

The door opens. Standing there are two soldiers. It's always the same two, both a bit older than conscription age, neither particularly Jewish-looking; one is tall and fair-haired, the other short and olive-complexioned. I call them Sven and Mario.

"Lehit orer," says Sven. This is all he ever says to me.

"Move your ass," Mario translates. "Someone wants to talk to you."

By now I know the way. They've questioned me three times in the past two days. Always the same questions asked in different orders by different questioners. The room isn't far, but I groan anyway.

I rise unsteadily. Pain shoots through both legs, and I move as stiffly and deliberately as an octogenarian. I'm sure I sustained serious damage to my knees during the pursuit. I asked to see a doctor. I asked many times. In Canada they would have let me see a doctor. Mother would have raged until I saw the best. Here I was told to stop complaining and wait quietly.

I shuffle down a corridor just as cold and sterile as my little cell. As always, neither soldier offers to help; they look on, bored and unhurried. The trip to the interview room takes five minutes. When I stop in front of the door, Sven nudges me to continue down the corridor. We take some turns and come to a part of the building I've never seen. The walls here are painted

a pale yellow and the concrete floor is stained and polished. We stop in front of a wooden door, and the soldiers take up positions on each side of it.

I pause before I open the door, eyes closed. I take a slow breath. Every important moment in my life has been a performance, and when I have failed, it has been out of fear. I have always struggled to find my calm centre—to tune out the crowd, my rivals, and, most of all, the judges. In my mind, I empty the arena.

Mario grunts in annoyance and pushes open the door for me. Inside is a cramped, windowless office: filing cabinets against every wall, a wide desk in the middle, and two comfortable-looking chairs on either side. Unlike in the interview room, none of the furniture is bolted to the floor. I gasp with relief as I ease myself into the nearest chair. Then I wait, or rather I return to that state of empty inertia that has come to rule my days since Ari's betrayal.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door. This is odd; none of the others knocked. Surprised, I part my lips to invite the visitor to enter but pause. It seems inappropriate. The door opens and a middle-aged man enters. The other interrogators had been young, military service age, just like the ones who'd questioned all the passengers getting on the El Al flight from Toronto. This old guy is no soldier. He's wearing civilian clothes: a cheap-looking grey suit unbuttoned to reveal a bulging gut. His full beard fails to conceal a double chin. He sits in the chair opposite me, sets a briefcase on the desk, and flicks open the latches with thick, soft fingers. Then he pulls a sheaf of papers out of the case and spreads them out on the desk. He takes a pair of reading glasses from his breast pocket and sets them on his nose before looking up me.

“Good afternoon, David,” he says.

“I thought it was morning. It feels like morning.”

The man ignores me. He picks up a sheet and seems to give it his full attention.

“You’re older than the last one,” I continue. Again, he doesn't acknowledge the statement. “Fatter too. I guess you're someone important, like someone who can tell me what the fuck's going on.”

The man continues reading the document for a moment before responding.

“Why are you in Israel, David?”

“Are you my lawyer? I asked for one. In Canada I would've seen a lawyer already.” And I would have been charged with something. At first I suspected, but now I am sure, that no one knows I'm here. Not the Canadian embassy, not my mother, not even the Israeli police.

“No, David, I'm not a lawyer. My name is Ezra. My job is to figure out what happened.”

“I told the other guys. I told them everything.”

“Tell me now.”

“They wrote it all down.”

“I read it,” says Ezra, tapping the papers spread out in front of him.

“Then why are you asking?”

“You make some extraordinary claims.”

“It's all true.”

Ezra riffles through the pile of papers and pulls out another sheet. “It says here you tried to join the army six months ago.”

“It's my duty.”

“It's the duty of Israelis. You're Canadian.”

“I'm also a legal resident of Israel. I have my papers.”

“Yes, your grandmother was a Jew.”

I nod. I myself had only learned this fact when the old lady died. We weren't exactly close before her death, only seeing each other at Thanksgiving and the few times she could make it to my competitions. As far as I know, my grandmother wasn't observant, at least not since she was a child, but that didn't stop Mother from bringing in a rabbi for the service. Afterwards, the rabbi asked Mother if he could help her sit Shiva. She explained that she'd joined the United Church when she married my father, and she wouldn't renege on her conversion no matter how that marriage had turned out. This was a startling revelation for me. Later that evening, I had a long conversation with the rabbi. That's how I learned about matrilineal descent.

"But you are not," Ezra continues.

"Actually, under the Law of Return, I'm considered—"

"You're not a Jew," Ezra repeats. "This is your first time in Israel. You have no family here, no job. You have no fixed address. And yet the first thing you did after getting off the plane was try to volunteer for the army. Why?"

"To defend the state of Israel from its enemies." It sounds lame, even to my own ears. I'm sure it sounded better the first three times I answered the question. Am I less sincere now? But why? Israel has so *many* enemies, real and terrible enemies. When I realized I was a Jew, they became my enemies, and it's not altogether unpleasant to have something so *real*, even if it's terrible.

Ezra rolls his eyes as if he has read my thoughts. Then he takes off his glasses and wipes them with a cloth he pulls out of his breast pocket. "You're in a serious predicament, David," he says. "I might be able to help you out, but only if you're honest with me." Ezra puts his glasses back on and takes out a pack of cigarettes. He pushes it across the desk.

"I don't smoke," I say.

“All Israelis smoke.”

I shake my head. Ezra shrugs and takes one for himself. He lights it and slouches back in his seat, watching me silently. He smokes the cigarette, periodically tapping ash into a Columbia University coffee mug. I shift in my chair.

“Should I start at the beginning?”

“Is there some reason to start in medias res?”

“Is that Hebrew?”

“No.”

“The others wanted me to start at the end or in the middle somewhere. The last one made me say it backwards.” They tried to catch me in a lie. I defied them with the truth, the whole truth as perfectly as I could tell it. Even so, I was worried at first about the small differences between each telling: the omissions and elaborations and occasional contradictions. Would they consider these lies? Or would they understand that truth is more slippery and changeable than any lie? Only a liar or a book can tell the same story twice.

“Why not start with you signing up for the army?”

“They didn't let me join.”

“Do you know why?”

“I know what they said. I had to wait for them to send me my notice. I needed an address.”

Ezra bends in his chair to stub out his cigarette against the mug's inside rim. Then he folds his chubby fingers on the table and looks at me expectantly. So he wants a story. Fine then. I've got nothing better to do.

I had no money to pay an agent to find me an apartment and no money to pay for one if I somehow found it on my own. My only choice was one of the communal settlements. There are so many kibbutzim and moshavim that I couldn't decide where to go at first. In the end, I picked Mishmar HaNegev from a map at the volunteer office in Tel Aviv. The lady there said I should choose somewhere in the north or along the coast, but I liked the idea of settling in the middle of the Negev. You see all these movies about this part of the world, and everything that matters, every battle—and every, you know, vision—happens in the desert.

So that night I took a bus down to Be'er Sheva and waited at the station until morning. A truck met me there and took me the rest of the way to the kibbutz. That fifteen-minute drive was my first real look at the Negev. The Negev isn't like other deserts, at least not like the ones in the movies. It hasn't got those rolling dunes like the Sahara. It's not like the American southwest either; there's no scrub brush, and the mesa, such as it is, isn't banded in lovely reddish hues. The Negev is grubby, littered with tawny, crumbling rock drizzled with motor oil from decades of tank traffic. Breaking the monotony of the terrain are fences, all slanted posts and razor wire, placed with no apparent logic, thrown up against some enemy, I guess, and then forgotten.

The kibbutz is a smudge of green in the middle of the waste. Decades of irrigation efforts allows some prickly grass and stunted trees to survive near the main cluster of communal buildings. The truck carried me past these, past even the surrounding factory buildings where, I later learned, the kibbutzniks manufactured polystyrene insulation. It stopped in front of a shack with walls of exposed cinder block.

“You are here,” said the driver, a swarthy beast with a thick accent. “Wait. Someone will come.”

The inside of the shack was a lot like my room here, except dirtier. And no toilet or sink. They expected me to walk all the way to the community centre in the middle of the kibbutz if I wanted to take a shit or get a drink of water. But it was about the same size as my cell, only I wasn't alone in it.

“Good morning to you,” drawled a lanky blond boy—a man, I suppose, in his early twenties—sprawled on one of the two “beds,” foam mattresses atop concrete slabs. “I guess you are my roomie and I am yours.”

His name was Nathan. He was a heavy-lidded Californian who spoke with the care and precision of a drunk driver at a police roadblock. He didn't rise to greet me, no doubt lethargic from the heat and from the enormous joint he was smoking. I should tell you that he offered me the joint, but of course I refused. I'm not here to break the laws of Israel, and I wouldn't betray the principles of the kibbutz. Nathan, on the other hand, was, to my certain knowledge, stoned every hour of the weeks we spent together. In case you're wondering, he said he bought his drugs from a Bedouin in Rahat, a short hike across the desert.

Nathan had arrived at Mishmar HaNegev two weeks earlier and seemed happy to be there. He didn't mind the size and miserable state of our quarters. He came from an affluent neighbourhood in Santa Ana, and he embraced our wretched circumstances as a test of his commitment to socialism.

“This is all we really need, right?” he said with a lazy gesture that took in the sleeping mats and the cinder block walls, which were unadorned except for scrawled graffiti in several

languages: names, rants, declarations of love, and marks recording days of confinement. “It just shows how little we actually require to, you know, function.”

“True,” I said, squinting out the only window. It faced south across the desert, across hundreds of kilometres of blinding, baking hills of sand and stone.

“Now you are surely wondering how you are to earn your keep in our happy community.”

“Not really,” I said. “That is, sure I’m curious, but I won’t be around very long.” I explained to him that I would leave as soon as I received my notice. He thought I was crazy to join the army.

“You really should think about sticking around,” he said. “There’s enough glory to be had right here. These people are trying to turn the Negev into farmland.”

I tried to make him understand that I wasn’t interested in glory. Glory is a mirage I’d chased for most of my life and it didn’t turn out well. But I knew I still wanted to do something important with my life, and I knew I could never do that until I left home—Canada, I mean. When I discovered my Jewish roots, I thought that Israel was the solution. I mean, people have always been drawn to this place. It’s like everything you do here has significance, just because you do it here.

The work they gave me wasn’t what I was expecting. Somehow, I figured I’d be digging irrigation trenches or something . . . something spiritually rewarding. Instead I worked with Nathan in the enormous communal dining hall. We spent most of every day staring at a hole in the wall, waiting for trays of dirty dishes to rattle through on rollers. Then we loaded everything into these big industrial dishwashers that looked as if they might have been donated when the kibbutz started up in the forties. It was boring work, real dummy work.

“This is glorious to you?” I said to Nathan after a week of this tedium.

“There are no small jobs, dude.”

“They're wasting us here.”

“When they know us better, maybe they will give us something else to do. You just have to, you know, show them your skills.”

The trays kept coming fast, and we had to hurry to keep up.

“What kind of skills am I going to show them if they don't give me a real—“

“Zivah,” Nathan muttered, and we busied ourselves with the trays that had begun to accumulate at our work station. Zivah, the head cook, walked past, down the aisle separating us from the food preparation section. We both stared after her; we were both a bit afraid of her, but she was undeniably sexy. She was older, maybe late thirties or early forties, but with a nice trim figure, like an athlete, and she was, I don't know, together in a way I could admire.

“—if they don't give me a real fucking job?” I continued when she was safely out of earshot.

“What's wrong with washing dishes? It's significant because you're washing them here, right?”

Nathan had become my only friend at the kibbutz. He was a genial companion, though his relaxed and sluggish demeanor made it easy to dismiss him as a simpleton. But he could be sly at times, and I wondered how much of his stoner persona was an act. At that moment, I knew he was mocking me.

“That's not at all what I—”

Just then a heavy tray came flying through the hole and smashed into the tray I was clearing. Both trays and their contents clattered to the floor. Plates smashed and leftover food

spattered. I stooped to clean up the mess while Nathan rushed to clear away trays that kept coming.

“*Tippesh!*” I heard from behind me.

Zivah stepped up to my workstation and began removing trays and loading the washer with impressive efficiency.

“I ask for workers,” she said. Her voice was throaty and rough, and her accent was thick Israeli. “They give me stupid, lazy children.”

“Sorry, Zivah,” I muttered, flushing.

“You are all so stupid in America?”

“I’m from Canada.” And no child, I almost added, but a man of twenty-five.

“That is in America, stupid. Go get a mop.”

“Help me understand something,” Ezra says suddenly. Up to now, he’s been listening silently, not even taking notes as the others did. “You resented your position at the commune. You felt it was somehow beneath you. And yet, according to the forms you filled out at the volunteer centre, this was your first job of any sort.”

His ignorance is so basic, so predictable. “Yes, I know I haven’t earned a salary as such, but I’ve worked—slaved really—since I was—“

“Yes, you were a competitive figure skater in Canada. That is, you participated in competitions. Did you receive any payment for this? Were you sponsored by any companies?”

“I didn’t take care of the business side of things.”

“Yes, that would have been taken care of by your mother—who was also your manager and coach, correct?”

I never mentioned that in the form. Has he spoken to her?

"And in the years since you stopped competing," Ezra continues, "what prevented you from finding employment?"

I run a thumb over one of the faded scars on my wrists. There's an answer to Ezra's question, but I can't bring myself to tell him. I am a failure. I know other skaters who claim that it's a great advantage to fail early at something difficult, something grand—to fail completely and then settle for something easier. Most skaters realize that they have failed—that they've reached the height of their careers—by the age of fourteen or sixteen, leaving plenty of time to think about a smaller future. My old friends have become accountants and florists and dental hygienists. I was better than any of them, just not quite good enough. I didn't know I was a failure until it was too late for me to move on. The therapeutic vacation I went on after my retirement stretched on for years—years of specialists and drugs and meditation retreats, all paid for by Mother while I recovered in the basement apartment of the family home.

Ezra waits a long moment. Then he shrugs and lights another cigarette. “Look,” he says to me, “I’m not a bad guy.” For the first time, I notice New York in his voice, a nasal plaintiveness I’d expect to hear in a Woody Allen movie. He must be an immigrant too. “I’m not your friend either, but I’m the closest thing to a friend you have right now. I can't help you if you're not forthcoming.”

“I don’t see what my work history has to do with anything.”

“You’re right. We’re done talking about that. Tell me about Zivah Shalev instead.”

“Which part?”

“How about when you began seeing her socially?”

Zivah. She is the most elusive part of my story, the part I can never get quite right. I never really knew her. I didn't know myself when I was with her.

We never got paid for our work on the kibbutz. We had our shack to sleep in, and we had our meals in the big dining hall, and every week they gave us a carton of Noblesse cigarettes. I had no use for these, but I kept them to trade—at first anyway. Turned out they were worthless. Everyone at the kibbutz got them for free, and the Bedouin traders who rode by all smoked those Farids—you know, dark tobacco.

The only other perk was disco night at the community centre. Free drinks and dancing. And girls. I didn't see many that first week, but Nathan said every good-looking woman on the kibbutz went to disco night. Even so, I doubt I would have stayed long if Nathan hadn't insisted.

“This music is terrible,” I said to him. I hate house music, and that's all they were playing that night.

“What?” he shouted. You had to shout to be heard.

“I said, ‘Let's get out of here!’”

“No, my roomie. This is where we are going to meet people!”

There was a small dance floor, but no one was dancing. In fact, just like in the dining hall and in the break room, everyone there sat in sullen clumps, drinking and smoking and talking with serious expressions. Nathan and I sat at the bar and drank shitty beer—all they had was

Goldstar—and didn't talk to anyone, not even the bartender. I think even Nathan was ready to leave when a couple of girls left one of the groups and came to the bar.

Nathan had an easy way with people, and he had decided that something was going to happen that night. He went straight over to the girls—I couldn't have done that—and started talking. I don't know what he said, but they laughed, and soon they were sitting at the bar with us. Their names were Ayala and Hadara. They were both tall and slim and deeply tan, wearing halter tops and short skirts that showed off their muscular thighs. They might have been sisters. I never found out. I should have asked, but I never think of things like that, not when it matters.

Nathan handled the introductions. Ayala turned to me and smiled. She smelled like some kind of flower. I can't remember which. I'm a bit embarrassed to recall how few details I noticed in those days, before my training began.

“So, do you live at the kibbutz?” I asked and immediately regretted the stupid question. Everyone in the room lived at the kibbutz.

“Well, I grew up here, but I'm posted in Eilat.” At that moment, I noticed the butt of a submachine gun jutting past her hip. Blind idiot that I was, I'd taken it for a purse. Hadara was similarly armed. It turned out they were on furlough from the army. They had to keep the weapons with them because there was no secure armory nearby. I supposed for you it's nothing special to see young women walking around armed. I've gotten used to it myself, but it had a strange effect on me then. The room, with its smoke and flashing lights and scowling strangers, felt unreal and somehow threatening. I got really quiet, and Ayala soon returned to her friends' table.

The guns didn't bother Nathan. While I sipped my beer, I watched him inch closer to Hadara, who didn't seem to mind. I ordered another drink and then another. I started feeling

better. I talked a bit with the bartender and got him to switch CDs. He put on some trip hop—still not my kind of music but a vast improvement. The other two drifted onto the dance floor and started swaying together.

I stayed for another drink and had just decided to head back when Zivah lurched against the bar beside me and ordered a drink. I hadn't noticed her earlier. She looked different without her kitchen smock. In fact, she was dressed much the same as Hadara and Ayala, and despite her age she looked even better—you know, more womanly. While she waited for her drink, I pretended to watch the dancers, though “dancing” isn't the word for what they were doing; they were kissing and fondling each other now, and I hoped that Hadara had a better place for them to go than my little shack.

“Five-oh-one,” Zivah breathed into my ear.

“What?” I turned toward her. She was leaning against my barstool, her eyes half closed.

“You are what we call a five-oh-one,” she said. Even over the general stench of the room, her breath stank of tobacco and some kind of sweet liqueur: Sabra, I learned later, disgusting stuff that Zivah drank in huge quantities.

“What's that mean?”

“You are a beautiful boy.” Her hand slid up my inner thigh and cupped my groin for a moment. Then she squeezed. Hard. The pain was intense and completely unexpected. I would have shouted, but she shoved her tongue into my mouth. Kissing her was like licking syrup from the bottom of an ashtray, but somehow the combination of sensations was very, very exciting.

“Was she your first?” Ezra asks suddenly. While I’ve been talking, he’s been checking his notes occasionally, but for the most part has been content to stare across at me. Now he scribbles something in the margin of his notes. He doesn’t bother to hide it from me. The characters are Hebrew.

“My first what?”

“Lover.”

“Of course not.” Tina Booker was the first. Maybe. Plain, clumsy Tina Booker in the back seat of Mother’s Caravan, the night we’d both washed out of the Skate Ontario Championship. We aborted our clumsy fumbling in mutual disgust, and I couldn’t really tell how far we managed to go. “What’s it to you, anyway?”

“I ask because the kind of sexual aggression you describe would be disturbing, maybe emasculating, even for an experienced man. It could create strong feelings of inadequacy and resentment.” He pauses and looks me in the eye. “Tell me, did you reach orgasm?”

“What?”

“The first time with Zivah, did you come?”

“Fuck you.” He’s some kind of pervert. I should have known from the beard.

“Never mind. Please continue, David.” He scribbles something else in the margin, God knows what. I should probably leave out the rest of the sexy bits.

That night I stayed in Zivah’s apartment in the central complex. I woke the next morning to the sound of the shower. I lay there staring up at the ceiling fan, luxuriating in the artificial breeze

and the clean bedsheets. The rest of the bedroom was spare and modern, with few personal touches. A framed photograph on the bedside table stood out. It was a portrait of a swarthy, serious-looking man in uniform. His smile was tight and grim, and his eyes were so fierce I thought he might be Zivah's brother. I asked her about it when she came out of the shower.

"That is Ari," she said, "my husband. Such a handsome man." This was the first time I saw her smile. I noticed it even through my shock.

"You're married?"

Ignoring the question, she sat on the edge of the bed and took a pack of Noblesse out of the side table drawer. Except for a towel wrapped around her head, she was still naked and dripping from the shower; she preferred to air dry. I watched droplets of water streak along the groove of her spine down to her perfect ass.

"What are you doing with me, then?" I said.

"That is a stupid question, Daveed." Still facing away from me, she lit a cigarette.

"No, I mean I shouldn't be here." I swung my legs off the bed and looked for my underwear in the tangle of sheets.

"He does not come here very often. He works with the Ministry of Defense. He is a very busy man." She turned and watched me pull on my pants. "He would not care about you, Daveed. He has his entertainments and I have mine."

I buttoned my shirt as I walked from the bedroom to the main living area.

"You smell terrible," she said as I opened the front door. "You have twenty minutes to shower and get your work clothes. Don't be late."

I *was* late for my shift, but she didn't say anything when I joined Nathan at our station in the kitchen. In fact, Zivah didn't even glance at me that entire day. I did my best to ignore her in

return. I also ignored Nathan's questions. Apparently, he hadn't been so involved with Ayala—or was it Hadara?—that he failed to notice me leave with Zivah. I listened to his own tale of the evening but waited until we were back at the shack before telling my own.

“Wow, that is, as they say in the common parlance, some heavy shit,” Nathan said. God, I hated the way he talked. He was sitting cross-legged on his mattress, folding together an elaborate, twenty-paper joint—or “smokable sculpture,” as he called it.

“I know. I can't believe she's married.”

“No, my roomie, it's who she's married to. She said he works *with* the defense ministry, not *for* it? Those were her words? And she didn't say what he does?”

“Yeah.”

“This sounds like a euphemism. My guess would be that he's in the Mossad.”

“The what?”

He looked at me like Zivah looked at me, like you and the others look at me. Like I'm an idiot. Don't deny it. I'll admit that there's plenty I'm ignorant of. That's part of the price of focusing on one goal for my entire life. But my focus and discipline are what made me so interesting to . . . No, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Nathan explained about Israel's secret service. He even had a book about it: *By Way of Deception*. You've heard of it? I haven't read much in my life, but that book is really something. I read a good chunk of it that night, enough to make me decide I'd spent enough time on the kibbutz. I'm not saying I was convinced that Ari was a Mossad agent, but Nathan had planted a seed in my mind, and the idea of the Mossad was fantastic and terrifying. It should scare you too: a cabal of spies and assassins that answers to no one but the prime minister of Israel, that has no real oversight. Who in their right mind wouldn't be afraid of that?

The next day, I called the Recruitment Bureau to find out about the status of my enlistment, but no one there could tell me much. I was told to stay where I was. What could I do? I stayed. And the next day, when, after my shift, Zivah came up behind me in the change room and grabbed my crotch, what could I do?

“Go take a shower and meet me at my place,” she said.

“No, Zivah, I can’t,” I said, “You’re married. It’s wrong.” But she took my hand and squeezed it between her thighs and started grinding against it. What could I do? She was my boss, and she could cause trouble for me on the kibbutz. I did what I had to under the circumstances. You see that, right? Right, even you agree I had no choice. But I felt terrible about it. The next few weeks were very stressful. Zivah was so wanton. And insatiable. Every night, after drinking half a bottle of Sabra, she got what she wanted from me and then rolled over and went to sleep. Me, I couldn’t sleep properly in that room, not with that picture, Ari’s picture, staring at me from the side table.

“I don’t wish to question your account,” says Ezra, “but I had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Shalev at a ministry dinner. It’s very difficult for me to reconcile this image you’ve presented—this degenerate vixen—and the charming, articulate woman I spoke with.”

“Well, yeah, that’s one side of her. I mean, our time together wasn’t completely terrible. In the evenings she taught me chess—she said I’d never be any good—and I learned a bit of Hebrew.” And she was clever and knowledgeable and probably more sensitive than I make her out to be. I liked her. Why can’t I get this part of the story right?

“I think a woman of her experience could teach you many things,” he says. “Most young men would probably consider themselves lucky to be in your position.”

“Maybe I would have, too,” I say, “if it weren’t for Ari.”

One night I woke up in Zivah’s bed. I don’t know what time it was, but it was still dark outside. She was snoring beside me. I could see the curve of her hip beneath the bedsheet. But I knew—I don’t know how, but I *knew*—that we weren’t alone. I tried to sit up, tried to turn my head, tried to move. Nothing. Something had been done to me. God, I’ve never been as scared as I was at that moment. I think the only reason I could speak was because of the adrenaline rushing through me.

“Who the fuck?” I wanted to shout, but it came out a whisper. “Fuck. Fuck. Ari? Is that—”

“Be quiet.” The voice was deep, with a perfect British accent. “Try to relax. You think I’m angry. I’m not angry.” Beside me, Zivah’s snoring continued uninterrupted. “She’s a beautiful woman . . . right? Answer me.”

“Yes.”

“If it wasn’t you, it would be somebody else. But I’m glad she picked you. I think we have a lot in common. I think we should take the time to get to know one another.”

“Should . . . shouldn’t you be talking to Zivah? I should just . . . I’m going to . . . just leave you two . . .” My words slurred and then my mouth stopped responding to my commands. At the same time, I heard something, a ringing in my ears that got louder and louder. And the

room got darker. I felt movement from all sides, as if Ari weren't alone. I felt hands touching me and pulling at me. And then nothing.

I woke up with the side of my face pressed into the dirt and the morning sun burning through eyelids. I lay there awhile, not quite willing to move except to turn my face away from the glare. I was confused, an aftereffect of whatever had been done to me. Then I remembered Ari and our conversation. I forced myself to rise. Every part of my body ached, especially my head. And something was wrong with my eyes; even with my back to the sun, the light was impossibly bright. I had to squint to make out my surroundings.

I was in the Negev. That was all I could say with certainty. I was surrounded by nothing except sand and stone. And I was barefoot. All I had on were the jeans and baseball t-shirt that I'd left beside Zivah's bed. Someone had dressed me and left me out there. Ari.

I was at the base of a hill, so I scrambled up the slope, the rock all crumbling beneath my bare feet. From the top, I scanned the horizon. Nothing but more hills. I had to use what I knew about the area, which, to be honest, wasn't much. I didn't even know if I was still near the kibbutz. If so, any direction I chose would be equally likely—or rather, unlikely—to bring me there. I decided to go east. Even if I missed the kibbutz, I would eventually make it to Rahat, the Bedouin city.

Wrapping my t-shirt around my head to shield my eyes, I started walking towards the rising sun. I kept my eyes on the ground at my feet, trying as much as possible to keep to the sandy patches. Even so, my feet soon became sore and then worse than sore, developing blisters on all sides. I walked for an hour at least before I realized that I'd either passed Rahat without noticing—impossible—or I had woken up very far from the kibbutz. I admit I was getting scared. The sun had gotten quite hot and the sand burned. I tore off my sleeves and made

makeshift socks that protected me from the worst of it. I decided to keep to my eastward course, knowing the highways run north-south through the desert.

I kept walking, past crumbling hills and dry riverbeds very similar to hills and riverbeds I'd passed earlier. Everything looked the same. When the sun climbed higher in the sky, I began to worry that I would begin walking in circles. I kept my shadow to my left as much as possible, but the valley paths I took twisted and turned so much that I doubt I was really keeping a true course.

Around noon, I sat down to rest under a narrow ledge—carved out by flash floods, I suppose. It was the only shade I'd seen in a hour. I sat there and massaged my feet, and I might have dozed a bit. I was startled awake by a vibration in my pocket. You might think it strange that I didn't realize I was carrying a cell phone—the others did—but the only thing I ever carried in my jeans was my wallet and there was nothing in there that could have helped me out of my situation. I never checked. Why would I?

The little flip phone I pulled out of my pocket was red with a metallic finish. I'd never seen it before.

“Hello?”

A crackling noise answered me and then what sounded like a voice—a woman's voice, I thought at the time—but then the crackling returned, as if I were in a car picking up a distant radio station and then driving out of range. Then the call ended, the signal lost. I held up the phone. I climbed the nearest hill, but I couldn't get a single bar. I tried 911—does that even exist here?—but it was pointless. All I could do was keep walking until I came within range of a cell tower.

Maybe an hour later, I got another call. This time the voice was stronger, and it was clear that the voice was male.

“Do you hear me now?” The voice was small and distant but definitely spoke English, and I had the crazy thought that someone was calling me from back home, from Canada.

“Ye-yes . . . Yes!” I rasped. My dry tongue and throat had transformed my voice into something I hardly recognized as my own.

“I don’t think he hears me.”

“Yes! I hear you! I hear you!” No answer but static popping. “Hello? I hear you! I’m here!”

I waited and waited for a response. Instead, I heard the drone of a motor. I spun around to find its source but saw nothing at first. Then a small plane passed overhead. I watched it recede into the south. It was flying low and seemed to be decreasing in altitude as it vanished over a ridge of low hills. Filled with new energy, I fixed its last position in my mind and set off south.

The sun was getting low in the sky when I reached the top of the ridge. From there I saw a small airstrip next to a highway and, further south, a city in the middle of the desert. I recognized Be’er Sheva. Once I reached the airstrip, I drank water and cleaned up a bit in the public washroom, and then I took a taxi into the city. I had no intention of returning to the kibbutz, not right away. I’d have to go back for my passport, I knew, but first I wanted shoes and a place to rest for the night. The taxi brought me to a downtown youth hostel. It was overpriced, but the hot shower made it worth the expense. I went to a nearby market and bought socks and sneakers, a fresh shirt, some food, and a phone charger. Then I crashed on my bunk in the hostel’s crowded dormitory.

The cell phone woke me the next morning. It was still a mystery to me. I'd studied it a bit the previous evening, but all of its contents, even the contact list, were in Hebrew. I wasn't sure what to expect when I answered it.

"Hello?"

"*Boker tov*, David. There's a café next door. Go there now." The voice was deep and masculine and distinctly British.

"Who . . . Ari?" The line clicked. I put down the phone and thought about my options. It occurred to me that if Ari were in the Mossad, it would be a simple matter for him to track the cell phone. I considered leaving it in the bunk and sneaking out the back door. But of course even if I managed to evade him, Israel is such a small country and has so many military checkpoints that it would be impossible for me to stay hidden for long. I decided I didn't have any options, and the café was at least a public place.

I went to the café. There were a few people drinking at the tables outside, but none of them resembled the picture on Zivah's nightstand. The phone vibrated in my pocket. I answered.

"Ari?"

"Sit. Order some coffee."

I sat at a table, and a waiter came from inside.

"*Atem mukhanim le hazmin?*" he said.

"*Kos kafeh bevakasha.*"

The waiter shrugged and went back inside. Typical Israeli service.

"You speak Hebrew," Ari said. "That's good."

"Just a little. Zivah—"

"We can talk about her later. First, you have questions."

Of course I had questions.

“Why?”

“You mean why am I doing this to you? Despite what you probably think, it’s not personal. You might fit a profile we’re looking for.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think, David?”

“The Mossad.”

“You said it. That’s the last time I want to hear the word. And I’ll know, even if you say it in your sleep.”

“But you can’t just take people and . . . You don’t have the right.”

“We have every right. You volunteered.”

“I didn’t.”

“You volunteered for the Israel Defense Forces. That makes you a potential recruit for us.”

The waiter returned with a small cup of Turkish coffee and set it in front of me.

“David,” Ari continued, “haven’t you always suspected you were made to do something important?”

“Yes.”

“What we do is important. We’re the elite, fighting a war that never ends.”

He had me. I was too scared of him to refuse, and at the same time unsure that I wanted to refuse.

“So what now? Am I in the . . . the army?”

“Not yet. My first job as your *katsa* is to evaluate your ability to learn tradecraft. There are some tests.”

“And if I pass?”

“We can use you.”

“And if I fail?”

“I’m sorry, David.” And he sounded genuinely sorry. “If you fail any of these tests, I have to kill you. If you try to run, I’ll kill you. If you talk to anyone about this, I’ll kill you. In fact, I’m going to kill you in five minutes unless . . .”

I don’t need to tell you the effect this speech had on me. “Unless what?” I shouted. People at the other tables turned towards me.

“Pick a number between two and seven.”

I froze. I just couldn’t answer, as if he’d spoken the request in a foreign language.

“Relax,” he said. “Any number will do.”

“Okay, seven. What—”

“Now pick another number, between one and four.”

“Two. Unless what?”

“Look at the building directly across the street.”

It was a seven-storey apartment building. The bottom floor was all storefronts.

“Unless I see you up there on that seventh-floor balcony—the second from the left. I want to see you standing there with a resident of the apartment, with a glass of water in your hand. Unless you can arrange that in five minutes, I’m going to kill you.”

I stared up at the balcony, dazed, I suppose, with the unreality of the situation.

“Four minutes, fifty seconds. And keep this line open.”

I bolted from my seat and into the street. Cars coming from both sides honked and swerved to avoid me. I heard shouts behind me as I charged up the building's steps and through the double doors into the rundown lobby. There was no security door, or if there was, it wasn't working. A bit of luck. I ran to the elevator and mashed the up button repeatedly. After a moment, I noticed a hand-written sign taped to the door. It was in Hebrew, but its meaning was clear; there was a fat arrow pointing in the direction of the stairwell.

“Fuck!”

I'm not in as good shape as I used to be. Sprinting up those stairs winded me. On the seventh-floor landing, I bent over gasping.

“I had to pick seven,” I muttered to myself.

Ari's voice startled me. It came from the phone I still held in my hand.

“What?” I said, lifting the flip phone to my ear.

“I said, ‘Focus on the task.’ You should be using this time to work out your plan of action.”

I walked down the hallway until I found the door I was looking for and then paced in front of it while I caught my breath and considered my options. Then I stopped and raised the phone.

“What if no one's home?”

“You'd better hope they are. Do you have a plan?”

I didn't answer. There are techniques I use before a performance, ways of clearing my head. Breathing and visualization techniques. I used those now. Then I let the hand holding the phone drop to my side and knocked on the door with the other.

After a short wait—it felt long at the time but couldn't have been longer than half a minute—the door opened partway, stopped short by a chain lock. An old man peered through the opening. His rheumy, tired eyes reminded me that it was still quite early in the morning. I put on my best smile.

“Good morning. I wonder if I—”

“No English,” he said in a thick accent—Russian, I think. Then he closed the door.

I leaned into the door and raised my voice. “Did you know we're making a movie on your street?”

After a moment, the door opened again.

“Shooting begins next month,” I said. “Do you know Steven Spielberg?”

The man nodded.

“He's producing, not directing, but it's still a pretty big deal. There's an important scene on your street, and we want to shoot it from a bunch of different angles. I think your balcony might be perfect. Would you consider renting out your apartment for two days?” The guy just stared at me. I couldn't tell if he understood. I kept smiling. “I can offer eight hundred shekels a day and double that if we need a third day.”

The old man closed the door again, but this time I heard the chain lock being removed. Then the door opened completely. The man stood there, all bony elbows and spindly legs, in boxer shorts and a grimy, oversized wife-beater.

“Great. Do you mind if I take some pictures from your balcony to show to the director of photography? If he approves, I'll be back later today with the contract.”

The old man stood aside, and I walked in. The blinds were all drawn in the small, grimy apartment. I walked through the main living area, followed by the old man, who moved quite slowly, forcing me to slow my own pace.

“Of course we'll put you up in a hotel—a good one—during shooting.”

I slid open the balcony door and stepped out into the sunlight and smiled back at the old man.

“Wow, it's a hot one today. Think I could get a glass of water?” I mimed drinking from a glass. “Water? Please? *Kos mayim bevakasha?*”

He nodded slowly and shuffled to the kitchen. I leaned against the railing and looked down at the sidewalk café and saw my sullen waiter serving another table. For a moment, I felt absurdly guilty for not paying for my coffee. Recalling my situation, I raised the phone to my ear.

“Thirty seconds,” Ari said. From inside the apartment, I heard running water. My fingers rapped a staccato against the railing. I willed them to be still, but I couldn't turn off the disjointed rhythm.

“I don't see you.”

“I see you. Twenty-five.”

Visible through the open balcony door, the old man was shuffling through his living room, bearing the glass of water. He moved with agonizing slowness, oblivious to the life he held in his hands. My own hand was now hammering the beat, palm striking wrought iron.

“Ten.”

The old man finally stepped onto the balcony. I snatched the glass from his hands—damn courtesy—then I brought it to my lips and leaned over the railing, making sure the action was

clearly visible from the street, from the facing buildings, from the air—from wherever Ari might be watching.

“Thanks,” I said and then looked down at the street. “Oh yeah, this is perfect. Come take a look.”

The old man joined me, and I gestured with the glass.

“You see, we're going to have a military convoy pass down this way. The hero will be sitting at that café when the—”

“No camera.”

“Hmm?”

The geezer no longer seemed befuddled. His eyes were narrowed and a bit hostile. “You say you take pictures. No camera.”

“Right. Stupid me. My partner actually has the camera. He's down in the truck. I'll be right back.”

I felt his suspicious eyes on my back as I exited the apartment. Ari contacted me again as I descended the stairwell.

“You accomplished the mission, but you were sloppy. You didn't think your plan through completely.”

“Next time give me six minutes before you kill me.”

“Don't get smart. You have to do better. You're lucky he didn't call the police.”

“Mr. Cherkassky did call the police,” Ezra says. “I've read the report. That's a part of your story we've been able to corroborate.” He taps another cigarette out of his pack. “Did you really believe this Ari would kill you if you failed?”

“I know it seems extreme. I've thought a lot about that. He may have just wanted to motivate me. It worked, of course.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“What?”

“Your success. The deception. The way you talk about it. Did you enjoy it?”

“That's not the word. But there's something about operating on a level like that, where every move you make is important.”

“So Ari's evaluation of you was correct? You felt like you belonged among some kind of elite?”

“You make it sound like arrogance.”

“Isn't it?”

“I've never accepted mediocrity from myself.”

“Yes, your skating career. And yet seven years ago, when you tried out for Canada's Olympic team, you weren't even invited to the training camp.”

Where's he getting his information from? “That was just politics. If you don't play by their rules, if you don't have the right coach, one of their in-group, they'll never let you show them up. ”

“Did you blame your mother for—”

“I don't want to talk about her.”

“Fine, let’s not talk about her as your mother. She was also your mentor, wasn’t she? And as a mentor, she failed you. You must have felt it. She kept you from getting an approved coach, kept you from succeeding.”

I say nothing. It's just like when I had that trouble back in Canada. After I hurt myself, the doctors had all asked about Mother. They seemed to think I resented her, even hated her. It would have made their jobs easier, I think, if she was the source of my pain, but Mother always said a winner owns his failures.

“Did you begin to see Ari as a different sort of mentor? A kind of surrogate?" Ezra lets the question hang for a long moment. Then he sighs. "What happened next?"

“He said he'd contact me. But he didn't, not for a long time.”

“Were you relieved or disappointed?”

“Just empty.”

I'm not sure how long I stayed at the hostel. Every day or two I'd have new bunkmates in the dormitory: young people, backpackers. I never said much to them, and they left me alone. I was drifting, burning through shekels, my sole mental effort the weary countdown to the day I would have to choose between food or shelter. Eat, shit, sleep. My life there was no different from my life in Mom's basement. Time passed. Then I received another call.

“*Boker tov*, David.” Ari’s voice woke me from my torpor. It was as if the intervening time had never occurred.

“Where have you been?”

“I have other responsibilities.”

“Other recruits?”

“Get up. You have an assignment.”

First he sent me to the market for a pen and notepad. He also had me buy a wireless headset for the cell phone. I couldn't really afford it, but I saw the sense of it. The store clerk paired it to the phone for me.

“Good,” said Ari as I exited the shop. “Keep it in your ear for the rest of the assignment. Now look around and choose a person. Choose carefully, because you're going to be following that person for the rest of the day.”

There were lots of people to choose from. First I considered a young woman walking past pushing a child in a stroller. A pair of middle-aged men in suits came walking from the other direction. Then a girl—really sexy, with a short skirt, low-cut shirt, stilettos, the whole kit—walked out of a nearby café holding a coffee cup in each hand. Then a dark-haired young man wearing jeans and a t-shirt stepped off a bus across the street.

“Found him.”

“Why did you choose him?”

“I don't have a car. He's using public transit. Also, he looks like he might work in a shop, but definitely not in an office. And he's a guy; he'll be less sensitive to being stalked.”

“Good. Now follow him. Write down everywhere he goes, everything he does, everyone he talks to. Find out where he lives.”

“Okay. Simple.”

“Need I say what will happen if he notices you?”

“No need.”

The young man started walking away. I waited a moment and then followed. I followed him to a café and, from inside a sporting goods store across the street, noted that he ordered an iced tea and read a book and smoked cigarettes. Then I walked out of the store and passed close enough to see that the book was in English, something by Leon Uris—his fingers covered the title—and the cigarettes were Silk Cuts. I made a note.

Later he stopped at the Bedouin Market. I watched him trying on jeans at a market stall while I pretended to shop a few stalls away, at a place selling knives and wristwatches. He wasted the merchant's time, trying on several pairs of jeans, then leaving without buying anything. I actually bought something from the merchant I was using for cover. I spent so much time toying with a butterfly knife, flipping it open and closed, that I felt obliged to take it.

In the evening, he went to a repertory cinema with two titles on the marquee: *Harvey* and *Strangers on a Train*. I pretended to wait in line long enough to see him walk into the Hitchcock film. I made a note.

“This guy has a lot of time on his hands,” I muttered. “A tourist?”

“Or a student,” Ari said through the earpiece, surprising me. “Now you know how I feel keeping tabs on you. You might as well be following yourself.”

After the young man left the cinema, I took my greatest risk: following him onto a bus and, later, getting off at the same stop. If I had made any mistakes that day, if I had called any attention to myself, I knew the jig would be up. Fortunately, he was oblivious. Even so, it was now night and the streets were quiet, so I gave him a generous lead as I trailed him home. He lived, or was staying, at the periphery of Be'er Sheva, on Mota Gur Street. Down the road, I could see where the street lamps, ending as abruptly as runway lights, gave way to the deep night of the Negev. My quarry walked into a building with a hair salon on the ground floor and four

apartment units with darkened windows above. I sat in a densely postered bus shelter across the street, watching the building until the lights turned on in one of the units. I made a final note and closed the notepad. Then I looked back at the building. A light had turned on in one of the other units.

“Fuck.”

I went to the street and scooped some pebbles from the gutter. I threw a handful at the second apartment and hid behind the shelter. A moment later, the young man appeared at the window and peered down into the street. I opened the notepad and corrected my final entry.

I had settled into my bunk back at the hostel when Ari contacted me again.

“Now for a pop quiz,” he said.

“I hate those.”

“You'll really hate this one. Write this down. Ten questions, single word answers. You can use your notes.”

I took out my notepad and, lying on my belly, wrote down a column of numbers.

“Question one. When he was at the café, you watched him from inside a sporting goods store. How many employees were in the store?”

I almost wrote “one” but realized I'd only noticed the woman because she'd approached me. I had no idea if someone else had been working there.

“Question two. In the restaurant, what was the soup of the day? It was written in English on the front window.

“You didn't tell me to take notes on that!”

“True,” Ari said. “Here's an easy one. Question three. On the bus, did the driver have any sort of facial hair?”

“Maybe. I don't know,” I said, starting to panic. “I don't know any of these!”

“Weren't you paying attention?”

“I was paying attention to the guy, like you told me.”

“Do you think you're being treated unfairly?” Ari asked softly. “I believe you knew what was at stake.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

There was a long silence. I'm sure now that he was taking pleasure in drawing out my fear.

“No, David,” he said finally. “You passed the test I gave you. He never noticed you. The quiz was just to make a point: what you don't notice will get you killed in this line of work. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now go back to sleep. I'll contact you. *Lailah tov.*”

Of course I didn't sleep for a very long time. I made a decision that night. I knew I had failed the assignment, whatever Ari said. I couldn't fail again. I knew that if he didn't kill me, he would abandon me. I couldn't have handled that. I needed to become the best.

Ari didn't contact me the next day, so I went out and chose a new person to follow. This time I kept exhaustive notes, not just on my quarry, but on everyone and everything in my environment. I did the same thing the next day and every day for weeks. This activity filled me with purpose. And I was good at it; I was never noticed. It's really not difficult to trail civilians. The average person's awareness is so restricted to their petty concerns. It's easy to stay just outside that narrow field. The challenge, as Ari had taught me, was to keep myself from becoming as blind as my targets.

“You’ve been busy,” Ari said the next time he contacted me. “Are you ready for a pop quiz?”

This time I knew the answers to about half of his questions. I was disappointed in myself, but I think he was impressed. I think that’s why he brought my training to the next level.

The next day he told me to take a bus to where Highway 25 crosses the road to Shaqib al-Salam. From there, he had me walk a kilometre south until I reached a much smaller crossroad. I sat in the dirt the side of the junction and waited for instructions, feeling uncomfortably exposed. A truck passed me and slowed as it did, its flatbed filled with young Bedouin men who stared at me with frank curiosity. One shouted something in Arabic, and the others laughed. I watched the truck recede down the long stretch of road until it passed a cluster of buildings about a kilometre south, at the outskirts of the Bedouin town.

I wanted to get out of sight, but in every direction the terrain was devoid of vegetation and perfectly level, with the exception of the deep drainage ditches running along each side of the main road.

“What am I doing here?” I ask when Ari finally contacted me.

“You have your first real mission,” he said. “There’s going to be a meeting here some time today. We don’t know exactly when. You’re going to stay here and listen and note down everything you hear.”

“But how—”

“They’ll be speaking in different languages and dialects, but their only common language is English.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to plant a microphone?”

“Easier, yes, but stupid. These are very careful people and they have means of detecting electronics. You’ll have to turn off your phone and headset. Leave them off until I send someone to fetch you or until sunrise, whichever comes first.”

“But how am I going to stay hidden?”

“How do you think?”

I walked around the intersection. Ari’s tone suggested I’d missed something obvious. After a minute, I saw it: corrugated steel drainage pipes running under the intersecting roads.

“No . . .”

“I hope you're not claustrophobic.”

I slid down into the ditch and got on my knees next to one of the pipes. It was filled with rocks and sand. Pushing my knapsack into the opening, I shoved the rubble deeper into the pipe until there was room for me to shimmy my body in feet first.

“I’m in.”

“Good. Stay there until I contact you. It should be obvious, but I’ll tell you that moving from your current position before I contact you will mean a fail. So will falling asleep.”

“I understand.”

“Now disable your phone and headset. We’re going dark until sunrise. Good luck.”

“Wait. What if I have to piss?” No answer. “Ari? Shit.”

I switched off my devices, and then I twisted and squirmed until I was as comfortable as I could get. Then I waited.

Sounds pretty unpleasant, doesn’t it? Well, it was worse than it sounds. The heat was terrible. I was in that hole all afternoon, sweating my life into my bed of sand. At least I’d brought a water bottle. With a lot of cursing and fumbling, I managed to get it out of the

knapsack between my legs. I couldn't upturn it properly, so I held it above my face and tipped it. Much of the water splashed over my face and up my nose, but I was able to drip most of it into my mouth.

Even worse was the wildlife. The Negev is home to many ugly, creeping things, some of which I saw on my first trek down to Be'er Sheva. There are spiders, snakes, scorpions, things that like to hide in shady places during the day. I panicked the first time I felt something crawling up under the leg of my jeans. Unable to reach down, I thrashed, smashing the leg against the side of the pipe. It worked; I either knocked it free, whatever it was, or crushed it. After that, I used my feet to block the passage as well as I could with my knapsack and the rubble I'd shoved in earlier. It was enough, I hoped, to keep out some of the larger Negev denizens, the vipers and the deathstalker scorpions. The thought of one of these lurking in that hole with me actually helped me accomplish my mission. There was no chance that I would fall asleep.

I stayed quiet and listened. Occasionally a vehicle passed on one of the roads above, and twice I thought I heard the footfalls of camels. Afternoon became evening, bringing some relief from the heat. Soon my world became utterly dark. If I twisted my head, I could see a sliver of starry sky, but I don't believe there was a moon that night. I waited for hours. The silence and the darkness became intolerable. Against my will, I hummed half-remembered melodies, and once I heard a snatch of a muttered conversation. I strained to hear more and realized it was coming from my own mouth.

I admit that I wept when I saw the first glow of false dawn. Still, I managed to wait until sunrise before turning on my cell phone. Ari called immediately.

"Boker tov, David. Report."

"Thank God."

“Report.”

“No one came. There was no meeting.”

“You fell asleep.”

“No, I didn't. No one came.”

“I came. An hour ago I walked within ten feet of your position.”

“Bullshit! I was awake the whole fucking night!”

“Good. Go get some rest.”

“There was never going to be any meeting. Right? Ari! Answer me, you fuck! There was never any meeting! This was another fucking test!”

“Do you think you passed?”

“Too fucking right I passed!”

“Right. So stop bellyaching and go get some breakfast.”

“I want to talk to you. Face to face.”

“You will. Soon.”

“It sounds like you were losing your fear of him,” Ezra says.

“He must have thought so too,” I say. “I think he pushed the real mission forward earlier than he'd intended.”

“Yes, tell me about the mission.”

I stopped at a grocery store on my way back to the hostel. I was still filthy from my ordeal in the drain pipe, but I needed food more than I needed a shower. Ari called while I was waiting in line at the express check-out counter. He asked if I was ready for a real mission—not a test but a real opportunity to prove myself. Of course I said yes.

“It's simple,” he said. “I'm going to tell you the name and location of a person, and you're going to go there and kill them.”

I laughed. I don't know why I thought he was joking. “Not likely.”

“You will.” There was no humour in his voice, no inflection whatsoever.

“Fuck no!” I said. “I'm not a murderer.”

My outburst caused the people in line ahead of me to turn and stare. No one can stare like Israelis. Still, I ignored them.

“You signed up for this,” Ari said.

“To be a soldier.”

“I told you this is a war.”

“Get someone else!”

“Did you think we were playing a game? You know who we are and you know one of our tasks is to eliminate enemies of Israel, whoever and wherever they are.”

“I won't do it!”

“If it helps, the target is a known traitor who's been living in Israel for years, helping our enemies, sabotaging our operations.”

“Kill him yourself.”

“What did you think you'd be doing for us? You don't speak Arabic or even Hebrew. You have no military or technical background. Your only strengths are your harmless appearance and your willingness to follow orders.”

“I won't follow this one.”

“If I misjudged you, we can't use you.”

“You did misjudge me. I'm not who you think I am.”

“Are you going to make me kill you, David?”

The question gave me pause. I had made it to the front of the checkout line and the cashier was glaring at me. I set my basket on the counter and smiled at her. I realized I wasn't afraid of Ari anymore. I decided to call his bluff.

“Fuck you,” I said into the headset. “Go ahead and kill me. I won't do it.”

I had to wait a long time for Ari's answer. I began to think I'd been overbold in my declaration and tried to think of a way to mollify him. He responded before I could speak.

“We'll be in touch,” he said and hung up.

I wasn't sure how to interpret this statement. I didn't believe the Mossad would kill me. They had no reason to. I didn't know any of their secrets. I couldn't harm any of their operations. They might consider me a bad investment but not a threat. In any case, my fate was out of my hands. I decided to return to the hostel for a shower, but Ari called back before I got there.

“David,” he said, “you're in luck. You have two hours to leave Israel. There's a ticket waiting for you at Ben Gurion Airport.”

“Fine,” I said, closing my eyes and releasing a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding in. “Wait! That's not enough time. My passport's still at the kibbutz.”

“It's enough time,” he said, “but you have to leave right now.”

I pause in my narration. Ezra is slouched in his chair, eyes closed, nodding occasionally. I don't know how to gauge his reaction. Is he skeptical? Sympathetic? Confused? If I had to guess, I'd say he is bored, but why? The others showed great interest in this part of the story. I suppose Ezra has read the reports and thinks he knows how this ends. I want to reach across the desk and shake him awake. Hey! The story's not over! Not for me. Not unless he knows something I don't.

I negotiated a fare with a taxi driver. Together we established that the price of a ride all the way to Tel Aviv, with a brief stop at Mishmar HaNegev, was everything I had in my wallet, down to the last shekel. My smell and appearance no doubt accounts for why I couldn't get a better deal. I gave him half up front, and we left Be'er Sheva just as the street lamps were coming on.

I had him pull up in front the shack I had shared with Nathan. I went in and turned on the light. It was empty. Even the foam pads we had used for mattresses had been removed from the concrete beds. The Ziploc bag I'd hidden under my mattress, the one containing my passport and emergency traveler's cheques, was also gone. I called Ari.

“My stuff's gone.”

“Don't worry, David. I have it.”

“Where are you?”

“Have you forgotten where I live? Come to my place. I'm waiting for you.”

The cab took me the half kilometre to Zivah's—and Ari's—building in the kibbutz centre. From the road, I could see that the lights were on in the apartment but the blinds were drawn.

"I'm here," I said. "What now?"

"A normal person would knock. Try that."

I walked up the concrete path to the building's main entrance. As always, there were kibbutzniks sitting on the steps, smoking and talking. They went silent as I passed. I walked up the stairs and down a corridor until I reached Zivah's door. I knocked, and after a few moments, it opened. Nathan stood shirtless in the doorway.

"Whoa! My ex-roomie! Where have you been, Dave? We've been worried. Well, I was. Folks around here don't get excited about volunteers absconding in the night."

I looked past him and spoke into the headset. "Where are you?"

"She's here," said Nathan, turning towards the apartment interior. "Zivah! It's Dave!" He turned back to me. "Yeah, about that. You just up and disappeared, roomie. You didn't say anything. She made the first move, and I was like, you know, why not? Wow, this is a bit awkward."

Have you ever been on a long trip and, when you returned home, found that the people you'd left had grown smaller—and stupider? I hadn't been gone long, but I felt that way now,

"Be quiet," I said. I stepped through the door and he stood back to let me pass. Zivah came out of the bathroom, wearing a short housecoat.

"Daveed," she said, "you look like a bum." She came closer. "You smell like a bum. Why are you back?"

"I don't know."

Ari's voice came over the headset. "I think you do."

“My things. My passport.”

“No. That's not it,” said Ari.

Nathan spoke at the same time, making it difficult for me to follow either of them. “Yeah, I left all your stuff at the front office. You know, in case you came back.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said.

“This is the mission,” said Ari.

“What do you mean?”

Nathan answered. “You know, the office. It’s closed, but you can—”

“Quiet,” I said, holding up my hand.

“I never told you the name of your target,” said Ari.

“Target . . . ,” I muttered. “Zivah?”

Zivah crossed her arms and sighed. “What is it, Daveed?”

“Does your husband have any reason to want you dead?”

“This is a stupid question,” she said. “This is why you are here? To ask stupid questions?”

“You see what she is,” Ari said in my ear. “Complete the mission.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

Nathan steps between me and Zivah, holding up his hands. “Whoa, dude. That's not cool.”

“Please leave, Daveed,” said Zivah.

Nathan nodded. “Yeah. That's probably best.”

“Do it now,” said Ari.

“Shut up, all of you!” I said. “I can't think!”

Nathan advanced on me, palms raised. “Roomie . . .”

“Sit down!” I said.

“Roomie, you gotta—”

Nathan reached for my arms, so I shoved him hard in the chest. He lunged back at me. I hadn’t been in a fight before. The details aren’t clear in my mind. We wrestled. I don’t think either of us wanted to hurt the other. He wanted me out of the apartment. I wanted him to sit down and shut up so I could collect my thoughts. I had no fighting experience, but I was stronger, much stronger. I threw him on the bed.

“Now stay down,” I snarled and turned to Zivah. “Why did Ari send me here? You must know.” I was coming to my own conclusions. I knew without a doubt that Ari hadn’t sent me to kill Zivah. The plan was simply too stupid. He knew I was unwilling, and even if I weren’t, I hadn’t concealed my approach. I had a taxi waiting for me for Chrissake. The odds of success were terrible, and the odds of my getting away with it were worse. Unless . . . and here I had a sickening realization. Nothing Ari did was ever straightforward. This wasn’t a test like his other deceptions. It was a setup. I wasn’t there to kill Zivah but to arrive openly at her home and act deranged in front of witnesses. Zivah was in danger, I was sure, but not from me.

"Zivah . . .," I said. I wanted to warn her, but explaining my fear was not a simple matter. She was staring past me. From behind me came a moist whistling sound.

“Oh, Daveed, what did you do?”

I turned. Nathan was lying on his back where I had shoved him, with his lower legs hanging off the base of the bed. The handle of my butterfly knife—I’d forgotten I even had it—was protruding from the side of his neck. He was staring at the ceiling with these surprised eyes. Then he sucked in another breath that made his entire body shake and produced that wet sound.

“Oh fuck!” I said. “Ari, what did you do?”

“What did *I* do?”

I turned back to Zivah. “Zivah, it wasn't—”

She had already closed the distance between us and hooked a foot behind my left knee. I toppled backward, throwing out an arm to catch myself. Then she caught me in the head with her knee, I think. I feel like I lost consciousness for a second, or maybe I was just stunned. I remember Zivah shouting Nathan's name. Then somehow I was outside. I remember jumping in the car and yelling at the cabbie, telling him to drive. He was pissed, but he drove. That was the last time I saw Zivah. I swear to God, she was alive when I left her.

I shouldn't have left her there, but I panicked. It shames me to think that instead of calling someone for help, I threw the phone out the window. It's still out there in the desert unless Ari came to pick it up. When the taxi stopped for gas outside Kiryat Gat, I slipped away. I figured I'd already paid him more than enough for getting me that far. From there I hitchhiked to Jerusalem and found a place to stay. I read about Zivah the next day and knew you'd be looking for me. I wanted to come forward, but I was afraid no one would believe me. I stayed in the Old City while I tried to figure out my next move. But there was no move. I had no way to get out of Israel. I spent what was left of my money. If you hadn't caught me, I'd be living on the street now.

Ezra stands and opens the door. “Thank you, David,” he says.

“That's it?”

“That's it for us. I know more about what followed than you do. In case you were wondering, your friend Nathan will live.”

“What happens now?”

“I'll pass on my recommendation.”

“You believe me?”

Ezra sighs and eases himself back into his chair. “No, David. Your story is nonsense. I knew that before we started.”

“But—”

“The Kidon unit only—”

“The what?”

“The Mossad unit responsible for the kinds of activity you've described. It only recruits former officers of the IDF Special Forces. You're a tourist, David. A nobody.”

“Then Ari was working on his own!”

“You entered the residence of a high-ranking defense ministry employee, murdered his wife, and tried to kill her guest, an American citizen. The same weapon, the knife you've admitted was yours, was used in both crimes.”

“You're not listening. She was alive when I left. There had to be a second assassin, the real one.”

“The ministry is taking this very seriously. They want to know if, for example, your motives were political—if you're an enemy of Israel.”

“I'm not!”

“I'm inclined to believe you. My job here was to ascertain whether you're sincere or if this story is a lie you cooked up to support an insanity defense. Your story is nonsense, but you

probably believe it. Ari Shalev is real, but you've never met him. The person in your story is an elaborate construction, something you invented to justify the auditory hallucinations you've been having. The way you've described the night of the murder suggests you may also have experienced a psychogenic fugue."

I shake my head. "You're working with him! Where is he? Is he here?"

"No, David. I'm just a consultant with the ministry. You're a very sick young man. Fortunately, you're not our problem. Since you're not a security threat, you'll be passed on to the regular authorities. You'll be tried and imprisoned for life unless you are judged legally insane, in which case I expect you'll be sent back to Canada for treatment." He looks up at the open doorway. "*Rav turai, bo hena bevakasha.*"

Sven enters and takes me by the arm. I let him lead me back to my cell, where I slump onto my cot, exhausted. I lie back and doze for a while, but I don't sleep. My mind keeps going back to what Ezra said. Is it possible? I try to remember the events of the last several weeks. They feel like real, solid things. Ari's voice, the feeling of being connected to something bigger than me. All real. Realer than real. Why couldn't I communicate that to Ezra? Did I get the story wrong?

I stand and pace the circumference of my cell. In my mind, I go over my story again, the way I told it to Ezra. All true, but if Ezra is right, I can't trust my own judgment. So I try telling it a different way, as if it were something that happened to someone else. Vaguely, I notice them slide my evening meal through the slot. I continue pacing and muttering. I'm hungry, but what I'm doing feels more important. After a time, they take the tray away again. Now I tell the story as if it were a report I'm preparing for Ari. I follow myself through the story, recording actions only, ignorant of motivations, privy to one side of phone conversations. I stalk myself right up to

the lost moments in Zivah's apartment. Then I bring the report not to Ari but to Ezra. He asks my opinion. *He's a lunatic*, I say. *A danger to himself and others*.

"*Erev tov*, David." The voice is muffled, but I recognize it instantly. I crawl to the door and press my ear against the food slot.

"Ari?"

"I'm sorry about how things have worked out," he says, "but it could have been much worse for you. If you think about it, you'll see that you brought it on yourself."

"I do see that. Ari?"

"Yes, David?"

"Ezra told me that you're just a hallucination."

"Do you believe him?"

Do I? "I don't think it matters."

Ari laughs. "It matters to me."

"But it doesn't change anything. If you're not here, then I'm insane and a murderer, and you're a symptom of my madness. My best choice in that case is to plead insanity, receive my treatment, and hope to be free before I'm too old. If you *are* here, then Ezra, the guards, the whole system is in league with you, and you're a symptom of the world's madness. If that's true, then the sane choice is to plead insanity, receive my treatment, and hope to be free before I'm too old. See? No practical difference for either of us."

"But what do you believe?"

"I choose to believe I'm sane. I can't prove it, of course. Nothing I've done seems very sane if I look at it from outside of myself. But if I'm sane, I'm not a murderer. I don't like the idea of being a murderer."

"Which is why you're talking to me as if I were real."

"Right." It feels good to be able to talk about this to someone who understands. "I think this is the ending you've always planned for me. I remember you told me at the beginning that I fit a profile. I thought about that for a long time. I mean, I wanted to believe you wanted me for my focus and commitment, but now I'm sure you were more interested in the time I spent in the hospital."

"Your psychiatric history does add plausibility to the story we wanted to tell," he says.

"You told yours better than I told mine."

"I've been doing this a long time."

I nod. I suppose I never had a chance. "Is it important, at least, that everyone think I killed her?"

"Very. What you said about the world being mad was correct. If people knew the things we do on their behalf, they couldn't go on pretending the world is sane."

"That's good," I say. "It's good that it's important." I'm very tired suddenly. "I'm going to sleep now. Thanks for coming. I know you didn't have to do that." I listen to his footsteps recede down the corridor. Then I go back to my cot and lie down. I feel better than I have since squirming out of that drain pipe in the desert. From now on, I'll trust in Ari and not lean on my own understanding. My path is finally straight.