Shulamit Gilboa

Four Men and a Woman

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Translated by Chaya Galai
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About the Author

Shulamit Gilboa was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1943 and began publishing poems and short stories at an early age. She holds a B.A. in Hebrew Literature and in Philosophy, as well as an M.A. in Philosophy from Tel Aviv University, and has taught philosophy at the academic level and literature and philosophy at the high school level. She was the literary editor of the daily “Yedioth Ahronoth” and wrote a weekly book column for the paper.

Gilboa received a prize from the Tel Aviv Literature and Art Fund and was awarded a writing stipend at Oxford in 1999. Her novel, *Four Men and a Woman*, has become a bestseller and was published in German by Bertelsmann, Munich. In 2008, Shulamit Gilboa was a Scholar-in-Residence at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.
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Chapter 1: Wild Girl

The four men of my life. Four men and one woman.
Only one?

Lying on a flower-infested sheet, the walls of the room encasing my world within a world, what’s left for me to do? In the intervals between relentlessly swelling waves of nausea, I take deep breaths, training the synapses to ignore signals from my stomach. The faces of all four of them, each in his turn, await my benediction. Only now, in their absence, can I endow them with the life I withheld before; and, acknowledge the diverse faces of love, which once appeared so alike.

The four men of my life. Each in his time and none of them in mine.

Memories of them are my fata morgana, my happy pill, my miracle cure for the sickness which may evaporate if I avoid naming it. One morning, I’ll wake up to the twitter of birds in the jacaranda tree, stride in my army uniform to the bus stop, my breasts bouncing gently, unconfined, at the request of the Seducer.

From the Rama Cinema to Ibn Gvirol Street, from there to Maneh Street, four flights up and then another half flight. A studio apartment: its roof balcony looking down onto a modest little park. Mothers and infants -nannies with other people’s children.

What will I do with my own children when I have them?
I’m never going to have children. Never.
Never say never.

Good morning, Dana, How you are?

Vicky is smiling. A wild girl is reflected in her black pupils. Leaning over me, she turns down the air-mattress motor, smooths the sheet. One hand plumps up the pillow, the other inserts two
more pillows under it, while I lie high up, waiting:

Did somebody call, Vicky?
No.
Nobody, sure?
Yes, she laughs.
Maybe Berta.
No.
Yoram?
No.
Yuval?
No.
Dana?
Dana po, she says in Hebrew, sounding like an infant just learning to talk, the words devoid of memories.
Rak po, here and nowhere else, I say firmly.
Rak po, she repeats, trying to adapt her usual soft, wheedling tone to mine.

Dana is in bed, I add, continuing our usual morning ritual for one more morning. How many mornings have there been, how many are left, how many will there be that won’t be remembered? Dana isn’t going anywhere, Dana is lying here.

Dana shokhevet, I say.
Sho-khevet. She smiles, happy to pronounce the word properly.
Dana shokhevet, I say again, Dana is lying.

Ly-ing?
Her hand is next to mine, light brown next to olive-brown. The motor pumps air into the rubber mattress, raising and lowering her hand, raising and lowering me.
Now it’s her turn to ask. She peers into my eyes:
Yoram?
No.
Berta.
No.
Maybe want to pee now?
Ah, yes.

For half an hour I’ve been walking up and down the street, back and forth, hoping that I won’t be noticed by the people in the first-floor apartments, where Israeli family life is being played out: smell of omelets frying, sounds of argument, the gleam of a white undershirt on a hairy chest as someone comes out onto the balcony for some fresh air. Back and forth, back and forth, for the third time now. If they do notice me, will they recognize me? And if they do, what will they say? Isn’t that the girl who comes twice a week and goes upstairs? You know, that man’s little paramour.

The unbearable lightness of otherness. Everything is drawn back to the starting point, the inconceivable normalcy bestowed by uncertainty: did it really happen, did he really say that, and if he did, how? Did he whisper, complain, sigh? And, his smile? Was it yielding, wheedling, matter of fact, chilly, passionate?

So many words in order to avoid the two words which set our relationship in its proper place: his wife.

His Wife: ¹
She walks down the street at his side,
In the air, in the light,
While I hide in the depths of my room,
Dark as night.
Now she is the one indoors, in the room, and while there’s a light on the balcony, and she is there, I can’t go up.

You do realize, Dana, that even if we arrange to meet, she’s liable to turn up suddenly. You do understand that I can’t just say: ‘Helena, my dear, my little Dana is coming this evening’.

When he calls me ‘my little Dana,” nectar flows through my

¹ Poem by Rachel, lamenting her doomed passion for a married man. (1890-1931)
veins, floods a separate lymphatic system.

My little Dana, will I see you tonight?
Dana, my little squirrel.
Dana, my little Dana.

Where Maneh Street meets Ibn Gvirol, there is a delta, dotted with empty cigarette packs. Pacing the street for the fourth time, I start counting my footsteps to relieve the monotony. Step overlaps step, never catching up. After every ten paces I glance up at the light. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, the light is still on. Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Not yet. Give me a sign, God, please, make him give me a sign. Perhaps he simply forgot to switch it off. His wife must have gone already, or perhaps she never came. Perhaps the light has been on since yesterday, the day before, even before that. Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one, forty-two. Once I even saw her face to face. A young couple burst out of the elevator, chattering, followed by a tall woman whose white hair was pulled back tightly into a chignon. She was walking briskly, a blue scarf wrapped round her neck. What’s the right word for her—impressive, well preserved? Eyes as blue as the scarf. After I tapped on his door and he opened it hastily and pulled me into a hug, whispering: If you’d come two minutes earlier you would have run into Helena - I made the connection:

Hair in a chignon? Blue eyes?
He nods. I love long hair.
A beautiful woman. I say, trying to sound nonchalant and mature. At least she must have been once; I can’t help adding with a touch of malice.

Come in here, he says, ignoring the remark, and we move from the narrow foyer into his office. A rectangular studio, its walls lined with bookcases, and beside the desk are a long brocade couch, a tiny coffee table and a leather lounger.

Sit down.
He sits in the executive chair behind his desk, piercing me from a distance of four meters with the lascivious look I’ve learned to recognize, and says with a smile:

*It doesn’t suit you to be petty. She’s who she is and you’re what you are, my little swallow.*

Is a single swallow, enough to augur spring?

I’m spring and he’s winter. It wasn’t until a year after I met him and we’d had sex and I was deeply in love that I read the cliché about spring and winter, April and November, and it made me feel vulgar, cheap, and whorish. Until then, I had always thought of myself as September. Long chestnut hair, almond-shaped eyes, olive skin, three trees embodied in a girl still unaware of her own power.

*Professor Yehoyada?*

*Speaking.*

*My teacher, Ora, told me to call you. I’m writing a project on the Nili underground organization.*

*Ora?* The voice is warm, hoarse, suppressing a momentary catch of the breath that will become familiar to me, *Ora Sternhof?*

*No, I am embarrassed. Ora Efrat.*

*Ah,* he catches his breath again. Of course, *Sternhof was her maiden name. And you, what are you?*

*Me?* I say, disconcerted: *I’m her student. I have to write a project on the history of the Yishuv. For matriculation? Ora told me…*

*Do you like her?*

*Yes, no. She’s my teacher.* This man asks unanswerable questions. *She’s a good teacher,* I hasten to add.

*And how old are you?*

*Eighteen, nearly.*

*Fine. Do you know where my office is? From Ibn Gvirol turn left into Maneh Street. It’s No. 32. Take the elevator to the top floor then*
walk up another half flight. You can’t miss it. I’m free next Monday.
Ten past seven.

Nothing in his tone prepared me for what was to come.

A thick mist hangs outside the window, and as I take the few steps to the bathroom, Vicky at my side, I slip on the ceramic tiles. A warm hand, an alien hand, thin and strong, grasps me as my wooden clog falls off and Cinderella’s toes are left bare and exposed.

*Be careful, you idiot*, I say, unable to restrain myself.

Vicky observes me through her narrow eyes. She has been with me for three months, at the behest of the Bedrock, and what does she get from me in return apart from money? When I crawl back into bed to practice dissociating myself from pain, anesthetizing the vicious owl snakes, she will smooth the blanket around me.

*Mist, Vicky.*

A smile, warm-cool, flits across her face.

*Mist, ah, mist,* she blinks.

I clutch her, gripping her arm between elbow and shoulder, too weak to inflict pain, weary of making efforts. The heat of my body, lingering between the sheet and the quilt, evokes in me pity as sharp as a knife-blade.

*Oh, that’s enough. Just go away now.*

Even the dissolving mist knows what I’ve managed to forget: a morning that begins with mist will end in heat.

Still patrolling, now for the fifth time, but who’s counting. Somewhere between the eightieth and ninetieth steps, a longhaired collie crosses the road, accompanied by a young couple, and I gaze at them enviously. The whole world is made up of couples, and here I am, besotted with an elderly lecturer, forty-two years my senior.

Turning back at the corner of Dubnov Street, I see that the
balcony is dark. A wave of heat floods me from head to toe, reaches my face, is replaced by a flush, backed by a racing pulse. She's gone, she's gone, and he hasn't forgotten. He's waiting, he's waiting. For me, for me, for me.

I walk rapidly, trying not to break into a run; with small, brisk steps I flit past the squarely-trimmed carissa shrubs, seeing in my mind’s eye tables laid for dinner, family togetherness, hot and sweaty undershirts. What have I to do with their monotonous, bourgeois lives, their nine-to-five jobs, their children and shared meals in front of the flickering blue screen?

The lobby of 32 Maneh Street has marble flooring and the elevator draws me in to the yawning black hole. Four flights and then another few stairs, and then the door and he’s standing there, waiting behind the narrow crack, peering out and he pulls me inside, and I’m caught again in his sinewy arms, breathing in the already familiar aroma of expensive soap, burrowing my nose into the space between neck and chest, and saying breathlessly: I’ve missed you so much.

There is no shame between us. Grandma Who Knows Best isn’t here yet, whispering in my ear. He leads me to the brocade couch, sits down beside me, one hand on my shoulder, the other clasping mine, and says: Let me look at you, my girl, let’s see how you’ve grown in the past week.

Where is the borderline, when does a girl become a woman? When is she finally weaned?

In his presence, even years later, I will still experience the melting surrender and trepidation of the first discovery, the wide-eyed excitement of that naïve, well-meaning child.

Tell me everything, all the details, he says, who have you seen, who have you talked to, what have you been doing, how was your week without me?

As I do every week: Nothing particular, I try to say. My shoulder is warm, and I can sense each of his fingers separately.
Professor Yakir Yehoyada has blue eyes like his wife and the wrinkles etched around them testify to his wisdom, his learning. The more we meet, the less I notice them, or the wattles, the prominent veins on his hands, the brown age marks. I see only the smile spread out into long sunny lines, the radiance of his joy at my arrival.

That first encounter. Monday evening.
Clutching the file of papers, silently rehearsing names and dates, in case he decides to test me, repeating like a mantra opening sentences which will vanish when the moment of truth arrives:

*Shalom, I'm Dana. Ora Efrat sent me. I telephoned you. Seven ten, you said., if you remember.*

*Do come in.*

*I'm sorry I'm late.*

*Come in.*

*I'm writing a paper on Alexander Aaronson, who discovered the Eretz Israeli wheat.*

*Fine, sit down,* and he leads me to the couch and gestures at the right-hand corner. Sinking into a leather lounger, he examines my face, my neck, my breasts at length. I feel awkward. What should I do with my hands, my hair, the top button of my shirt? I sit with legs pressed together, set at an elegant angle, just as the women’s magazines recommend.

*A paper on Alexander? What for?* We’re allowed to write a paper in the twelfth grade instead of taking the matriculation, I start to explain, and he waves me silent.

*You didn’t understand my question. I asked why Alexander, why not Sara or Lishansky or Aaron?*

*My teacher suggested it,* I say, feeling young and stupid.

*The teacher suggested it,* he echoes, stands up, goes over to his desk and picks up a black pipe from a square glass ashtray. His
white cuffs, exposed beneath his jacket, are decorated with square gold cuff links. Slowly, tranquilly, he sticks the pipe in his mouth, and takes a lighter, also gold, out of his trouser pocket. I observe his movements in silence, enthralled, convinced that everything about him is 100 percent pure gold.

_How much have you done so far?_ He looks up at me, exhaling smoke rings.

_I’ve read the school textbook, but…_

_There’s nothing there._

_I know. And I’ve checked in the school library and there’s nothing there either. And the librarian couldn’t really help. But I’ve read a little about the period and about Nili._² And I’ve been wondering how…

_Just a moment. Remind me how you came to contact me._

_You know, through Ora Efrat._

_Ah._

_She said that you’ve researched the period and you could…_

_I have indeed._

_She said you could help me._

_We’ll see, he says quietly, as if to himself, as if I’m not there, _we’ll see if you can use my help._ And when he sees my shocked expression, his mouth smiles but his eyes remain cold: _Why is Alexander so important to you, aren’t there any other subjects to choose from that period?_

_But that’s what interests me, I say. I want to discover something new._

_Discover something new?_

_He stands up and goes over to stand beside the heavy curtain masking the large glass door to the balcony. With his back to me, smoke rings spiraling above his head, he says in a tired, flat voice:_

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² Nili was a Jewish espionage network which assisted the United Kingdom in its fight against the Ottoman Empire in Palestine between 1915-1917, during WWI - _Wikipedia_
Before you can do something new, you need to know something, don’t you think? You dare to come and ask me for help when you know absolutely nothing. Nothing! You even mix up the names. It was Aaron who discovered the wheat, not Alexander. ‘I want to write about Alexander who discovered the Eretz Israeli wheat’. He mimics my voice. ‘And what do you mean, Eretz Israeli wheat?’ He discovered the ‘mother of wheat’ from which our modern wheat is descended. Do you understand? Do you even know what evolution is?

Even now, while the owls are still dormant in the snake’s belly, their great staring eyes closed in the hot, consuming blackness, I can still summon up, pure and vivid, the scalding insult that was submerged into my miserable sense of inferiority, stamped and confirmed each time anew. And I recall how I stood there, hopelessly struggling to conceal the hurt, gazed at him resolutely and replied:

_The parents came from Bakau. Rumania. They had four sons. The oldest, Aaron, came to Palestine when he was six. They also had four daughters, but two of them died. Six children were left._

_All right, all right, anyone can recite facts, he says, waving his hand dismissively._

_I mixed up the names. That doesn’t make me an idiot._

He turns round, indifferent, smiling at the buttons on my cloth shirt. _I know what we’ll do. Not Aaron, not Alexander, not Sara, not Rivka. We’ll write about the unknown brother, Shmuel. No, about Zvi. You wanted to do something new; didn’t you say so? So here’s our opportunity to do something new._

Offended and mortified, I move towards the door, trying to walk steadily. I’m not going to let that brute mock me. As I grope for the door handle, trying to swallow the lump of outrage stuck in my throat, two hard yet soft hands catch me from behind, turn me around, cup my face and pull me towards him. His blue gaze meets mine, and in that split second of reluctance, resentment and
surprise, I note the green flecks dancing there, sparks of liveliness and vulnerability. And as his fingers stroke my face, from temples to chin and back, a remote look comes over his face: *Child, how pretty you are when you're hurt.*

I sink back onto the couch, and from that point of no return our relationship begins. Seated beside me, his hand on my hair, he whispers warmly, his voice hoarse from smoking, *I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. I apologize.*

What do I remember of that first encounter which came before all the other first encounters?

His monogrammed handkerchief offered to me gently. Instant coffee, strong and heaped with sugar, brought from the kitchenette in a thin porcelain cup. Walking together to the bus stop.

*I'll walk along with you,* he says, *and I have a little piece of advice for you. Tell your teacher, Ora that I refused to help you. She'll be furious at me and sorry for you, and in the end you'll get a high grade. How about it?*

*I don't know. Why?*

*Say yes, say yes,* he urges, and, unwittingly, I cooperate. The first step of many to come.

*We don't really know one another and nothing came of our meeting, because I'm a bad person,* he says, winking at me. *But I want you to come next Tuesday afternoon at five, and I'll draw up a bibliographical list for you of books you can consult. Do you agree, child?*

I nod, confused but awestruck, observing the people passing us in the street, drowning in a vortex of emotions, both superiority and awe. Here I am, a seventeen-year-old high school student, the confidante of the renowned scholar, Professor Yakir Yehoyada.

And before he leaves me there, he takes my hand in a parting gesture and his thumb strokes my soft palm: *Do you feel better?* And without waiting for my reply, he continues decisively: *On Tuesday, bring a notebook and pen with you and prepare about half a page*
about the family home. Nothing copied! In your own words…do you understand?

And the new affront is the first in a series that only a masochist like me could possibly accept.
Chapter 2: The Heavens Wept for Me

Vicky positions the folding arms of the wooden tray on both sides of my belly, enclosing the sickness that is groping for further living space. Tasteless milky instant coffee and a dry slice of chocolate cake rest on a plastic plate.

_Ugh._

She flashes me a glance, her lowered lids cloaking misapprehension, surprise, perhaps reproof.

*What's this you've brought me, cardboard?*
*Cardboard? She repeats.*
*I want something fresh.*
*Fresh,* she confirms.

*Yes, and cream!* The word makes me salivate and disturbs the owl snakes I have just lulled to sleep. *OK, no cream, something else, but make sure it's soft.*

*But now card-board,* Vicky laughs, savoring the word, _and pills, OK?*

One by one she releases the pills into my cupped hand, the holy trinity of the morning: one against nausea, one for mood improvement and the final one whose morphine content Yoram agreed to reveal only after intensive interrogation.

Yoram, the Bedrock.

_Take it._ I try to push away the tray.

_Cer-eal?*_ Vicky decides and hurries to the kitchen to prepare the healthy concoction, which is of no earthly good to me, four spoons of oats, half a glass of water, and a third-of-a cup of milk. One dose every morning puts an end to heartburn and pain, believe me, no need for antacid pills, I hear the encouraging advice of Michal, the home hospice nurse.

_No cereal,* I shout. *Whole wheat bread and olives.*
Do you mistreat her? The Bedrock asks-states a month after her arrival, following her with his dark-eyed gaze as she sways out on her way to the store, her orange sack dress clinging to her behind. She doesn’t understand a thing you say to her, nada. I wonder what evoked his compassion, her slim body or his hostility towards me.

But you keep sending her off on errands. She’s a healthy Filipina, and nobody ever kicked the bucket from walking.

You’re a kind person, I know, he tries again.

You don’t know anything.

He rises from the two-seater couch facing my bed.

Go, go, you’ll be late for work, I say, trying to help him to leave, to prove that I’m still capable of consideration for others.

Black, not green, I tell Vicky, and push the breakfast plate towards her.

The mist has dissolved. Pale sunshine floods the bed, the couch, and the picture on the wall of two women embracing. When the sun continues its orbit, sketching a circumference whose pi ratio now escapes my memory, the rays will retreat, and the direct heat will yield place to soft, pleasant light. It’s only seven a.m. Early May, spring according to books and song. Not here.

Give her the anti-nausea pill fifteen minutes before food so that she can get some nourishment, Michal explains carefully to the Bedrock, listing each pill and its functions. When she leaves, he will explain them to Vicky, and when he goes, she…

Food, Vicky says, elongating the word. Pills, must take.

Bla--ck oli--ves, I say in return, two. And lots of garlic butter on the bread.

Cholesterol is the last of my worries now.

Vicky goes into the kitchen and comes back with the jar of olives, fishes out with a spoon what can be measured and weighed
and puts three of them on a plate.

OK?

Lying there, glistening with oil, plump and soft, they arouse in me that nausea which erupts without warning, and I raise myself up in alarm, throw aside the down-filled quilt, a gift from Yehodaya when I married the Bedrock, and try to stem the wave which Vicky, now experienced, hastens to catch in the large plastic bowl on the little table to my left where the pills stand.

When I first met the Bedrock, he used to wear a calf-length leather coat, which made him appear taller. In the long line for tickets to Les Parapluies de Cherbourg at the Maxim Cinema, we exchanged a heated glance. After the film, he was waiting beside the back exit and came over to us: Does either of you have an umbrella?

Dorit and I, blood sisters, gazed at him contemptuously.

Not for you, she replied. There’s a monsoon outside, he went on. It’s a hamsin, you idiot, she replied and we walked on. I started humming a popular song: “The two of us under one umbrella”. As we turned away from him, I felt his hand slipping something into my pocket. My fingers hastened to check, tightening around a slip of paper, examining it, but exercising restraint, because although Dorit was already married and there was no danger that she would mock me, I wanted to savor the sense of power that comes from knowing but not saying. Back in my room, I smoothed out the scrap of paper torn from a cinema ticket, and deciphered, between the printed row and seat numbers, words written with a blunt pencil: ‘I’ll be glad if you call me’. The telephone number was written surprisingly clearly.

I waited for two days, perhaps it was a week, why not a month? What did I have to lose? After Yehoyada and Uri, Grandma Knows Best was rooted deep inside me, lecturing me like Polonius: Tender
yourself more dearly. And I was listening.

Surrendering to the sweetness of anticipation, I wrestled with myself over calling him and was glad to lose. After an eternity, which was perhaps no more than a week or maybe only two days, one clear noontime, when the sky was cloudless, the friendly blue of fairy tales, I picked up the phone on the spur of the moment. I dialed purposefully, convinced that, as usual, nobody would answer. As the ringing echoed with empty certainty, my pride in my restraint was replaced by a fierce sense of loss, impelling me to call persistently, obsessively every half hour, every fifteen minutes, until at last, in the evening, I reached my goal and heard a dim, unfamiliar, indefinite “Hallo”.

What shall I reply? You looked at me in the ticket line; you put a note in my pocket.

_Hallo_

_I…_

_Yes?_

_You left me a number._

Silence. He’s silent. Oh God, who knows, maybe it’s a regular tactic on his part. He goes about dropping his telephone number into women’s pockets as if they were mailboxes.

_In the cinema_, I go on. You fool, I think. What a fool you are.

_Ah_, he cries out, and I relax, relieved. _It’s been so long. I was sure you’d forgotten or you weren’t interested_, he continues, lowering his voice.

Such directness. Did I already sense then that this time everything would go smoothly?

_As you see, I haven’t forgotten._

_Great. So now we must meet._

And I fall silent again, trying not to ask: When?

_At least we already know what we look like_, he says, laughter in his voice.

_But without names._
True. I'm Yoram.

I'm Dana.

Dana?

And I stiffen, recognizing in his tone what he is going to say and he says it: Dana kama, Dana nama, Dana from the first-grade reading primer, Dana gets up, Dana goes to sleep. What a name! Oh, sorry, he rallies, that's not very original of me, forgive me.

I decide to forgive him, feeling good again, perhaps convinced that this time it’s going to succeed.

Did I really know then what was going to happen, that we would get married and look for a house and want children, and eat dinner together and open a joint bank account and look into one another’s eyes as if to say: There’s a world out there and then there’s us and it’s us versus the world? Did I know, or does the time that’s passed permit me to pretend to have known? And anyway, why is it so important to know whether I knew then when I could say that I knew even if I didn’t.

And moreover, the more I take care to forget, the firmer the knowledge.

Vicky comes in with a hand-towel soaked in lukewarm water and wipes my face. She rinses the inside of my mouth with soda bicarbonate, water and a spoonful of lemon juice. And after a few minutes, when I sink back on the high pile of pillows, exhausted, she crumbles a small slice of bread, adds a small slice of olive and slips it in my mouth.

Oh, Vicky, my Vicky, I suppress my tears, what would I do without you.

On that far-off evening as well, as my finger with its bitten nail traced the lines around his mouth, and I forgot the long wait in the street, the week of longing, his wife, I still had vivid memories
of our second meeting, which marked the beginning of what, years later, in long, hallucinatory nocturnal conversations with the Bedrock, we nicknamed “the seduction”.

It rained lightly all Tuesday morning, and the heavens wept for me. Four times I jotted down a few lines about the Aaronson family, and four times I tore them up and threw them into the waste-paper basket. After my seventh class, I rushed to the library to find a book about the history of the Yishuv in order to add something, to pad it out, to find a sentence, which would tip the balance in my favor.

All week I went over the details of our meeting in my head, pinpointing the insult, pondering the physical contact. A slap in the face, I think to myself. That’s the only way to react next time.

Next time? Dorit says wonderingly. You mean you’re actually going back?

Not because of him, I say convincingly, it’s for work. He’s a professor, don’t you see? I’ll get a 10 on the project.

And you won’t tell Ora?

Why should I?

And if he goes on?

I’ll give him a slap in the face, I say merrily.

Great. That way he’ll learn his lesson, she laughs, and I laugh with her.

The rain continued all morning and the heavens didn’t take pity on me. At four forty five I was standing, clutching a blue office file, on the steps outside 32 Maneh Street, where I was to become familiar with every crack in the road surface and every weed in the sidewalk,. Inside the file, in splendid isolation, was a single sheet of paper covered in my slanting handwriting,

I ring twice before Professor Yehoyada opens the door, gapes at me for a second in puzzlement, as if trying to place me, and then gestures with a long arm at the room, beckoning me inside, locks
the front door (why?), sits down facing me in the leather lounger and gazes at me.

Silently I hold out the sheet of paper.

A little heart pounds fiercely as Professor Yehoyada takes a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles out of his jacket pocket, perches them on his nose and reads. Watching his expressionless face, I repeat to myself the short text I spent the morning writing:

“Ephraim Fisher Aaronson, a wheat merchant, and his wife Malka, came to Zikhron Yaakov from Bakau in Rumania in 1882. With them was Aaron, their six-year-old son. They settled on the northwest slope of Mount Carmel, and labored on the soil. Their surroundings were hostile. There were Arab fellahin everywhere, living in mud huts and tilling the soil. There were also many Bedouin. Malaria killed many of the pioneers, and in addition, the Ottoman regime ruled the country and many Jews suffered from it.

Over the years, the couple had three more sons and four daughters, two of whom died. The sons were called Zvi, Shmuel and Alexander and the daughters Sara and Rivka. Apart from Rivka, none of them are living today”.

Fine, he says and puts the paper down, and my heart skips a beat: does ‘fine’ mean satisfactory, good, excellent or does it mean that’s that, I’ve finished reading?

You're a hard-working girl, he says, one might even say responsible. Can I offer you a hot drink?

No, thank you.

Don't be shy. I prepared hot chocolate in your honor.

And without waiting for my response, he disappears into the kitchen, returns with a giant cup and places it in front of me on a straw mat. Drink, child.

What do your parents do? He asks suddenly.

Imma is a housewife and Abba is a bacteriologist, in a laboratory. Have you discussed your project with them?

No, why?
Because it’s interesting to know what they think. The labor parties were opposed to Nili. They thought the members were a group of pampered children of prosperous farmers who refused to employ Jewish labor. I assume that’s one of the main reasons why Nili remained outside the consensus.

I don’t tell my parents anything, the sentence emerges suddenly, I don’t know from where. They don’t understand anything.

He looks at me over the gold-rimmed spectacles, then slowly removes them, with a delicate gesture - I will soon learn what can be expected to follow - and sits down beside me on the couch.

Tell me about yourself.
What’s there to tell?
Do you have a boyfriend?
No.
In the past?
More or less.
Are you a good student?
Not exactly.
Not true. You are clever…and pretty and sweet. Look at me, he says, as I feel uncomfortable, look me in the eye. And as I look into the green sparks, his expression is suddenly indulgent: Will you permit me to give you a kiss?

Certainly not! I reply hastily, embarrassed, surprised at my mixed emotions: delight at the compliment, hungry anticipation, and the trembling buds of anger.

A kiss of appreciation. Don’t worry.

And again, without waiting for a reply, he cups my ears and head and pulls me towards him. I am careful not to incline my body in his direction, clench my buttocks in an effort to remain seated, but my head leans forward, without me, without me, and his head moves closer to me, his alien, cold lips kiss me first on the right cheek, then on the left.

Like Arab diplomats, I burst out laughing, leaning back,
relieved.

And then he tightens his grip, and his lips graze my forehead, brush the tip of my nose and then crush my mouth. They let go, press again, let go again.

*This is because you’re a clever girl,* he says, as I sit motionless, an unfamiliar, uneasy storm beginning to gather under my skin. This is it, now it’s time for the slap.

*We have a lot of work ahead of us,* he says, turning practical.

*What was it exactly I asked you to prepare?*

*Half a page on the family home,* I reply, breathing a sigh of relief.

*And what did you prepare?*

*What do you mean? A few lines on…*

*The period, the family, but not on…*

And again we are on familiar ground. One of us has the knowledge, the other is learning. One is lecturing, the other is being tested. An orderly hierarchy, which does not open up abysses. It creates familiar authority, instills confidence through setting limits.

*But I did write about the family.*

*What about the home?*

*What?*

*I asked for a half page about the family home. You said it yourself.*

*You meant the house?* I ask in amazement.

*House is one meaning of home.* Walls and building materials, rooms and furniture, quantity and space. A house also reflects the times – mud huts or cloth tents, wooden huts, brick, Jerusalem stone or prefabricated walls. Each material indicates something about time, available material resources, technology, and each house tells you something about its residents. The Arabs lived in mud huts they built with their own hands from straw and a damp mud mixture. Some of them lived in wooden cabins. Do you understand, my clever little one, do you see? The Jewish settlers who went to live on the hills and removed the stones and rocks also started out by living in wooden
and mud huts. But they very soon began to build themselves houses. Initiative, you understand? Determination. Have you ever seen the family house?

Once, on a class trip, years ago.
Years ago, he laughs.
In the fourth grade.

Well, well, he starts counting on his fingers. You’re in the twelfth grade now, eleventh, tenth, ninth. At each figure he raises a finger from his clenched palm. Nine years ago, he sums up suddenly.

Half of my lifetime, I confirm.

He contemplates me earnestly. Yes, indeed, a long time for you. But nothing as far as you’re concerned, I want to say, but remain silent.

They led us in, a whole flock of children. I can’t remember now what I saw. The bathroom, where Sara Aaronson killed herself after being tortured by the Turks. It was so small, and the little closet where she kept the pistol.

You can’t write the paper without seeing, without touching the subject you want to write about. He is ruminating, talking to himself. That’s the difference between a mud hut and Jerusalem stone, both are hand-built but the Jerusalem structure is built to last for many years.

And you can’t compare them for beauty, I add.

True. You can’t compare them for beauty. Although, he adds after a brief pause, each of them is beautiful and appropriate in its own way.

You’ll come with me to Zikhron, he says suddenly, straightening up briskly. I’ll be there next week. I’ll expect you.

How come? I say, alarmed. I don’t know the way.
Come by bus, he laughs. It’s not the end of the world.
But…
A day off school. Haven’t you ever done that before?
Yes, but…
And don’t tell anyone. It’s our secret. When we’re there, I’ll explain in detail everything I know about the recent past and the distant past, he winks at me, transforming the advantage of my youth into a drawback.

But…

Is Tuesday convenient for you? Take the eight o’clock bus from the central bus station. Too early? You’ll be there at nine thirty-ten, and don’t worry, I’ll be waiting.

Yes, but…

We’ll have lunch in a restaurant with a view of the sea, and you’ll be home by the late afternoon. Do you think you can explain the delay? Not a problem. After school I usually go over to Dorit’s house. Who’s Dorit? My best friend. So that’s settled, shall we say?

And after a brief pause, when his sonorous last syllable dies away, he adds: Next time perhaps you can bring her too.

An unexpected remark which sounds wonderfully reassuring because if there are going to be next times, that means that he’s taking my project seriously. And if he’s inviting Dorit without knowing her, that means it’s important to him that I feel at ease, and without intending it, I endow him with magical paternal qualities which are unknown to me. I prove to myself, in retrospect and for the umpteenth time, that girls can be seduced when they persuade themselves of the existence of something they have thought about, dreamed of, assumed possible, even if they have never encountered it in real life.

“Zikhron, Zikhron, that’s my town” I hum. The emerald fishponds gleam in the distance on the plain between the sea and the mountain. What or who made us buy a second home here, a two-story row house in a new vacation development, with its own minute patch of garden? And four years ago, a month after it was
completed, while we were sitting in the living room, furnished with nothing but a carpet and two loungers, the Bedrock said: *this is it, it's over.*

*It's the right time,* he says, *you have a house and a garden,* finding it hard to conceal his contempt, *what you always wanted.* *I promise to continue paying the mortgage.* *What's left? There's no point in going on.*

*And when was there?* I reply swiftly in order to hide my shock. *I don't know.* *Perhaps there never was.* Yoram’s familiar restraint. Blind and deaf as usual to the shattering currents within me. *Nevertheless we dragged it out for nineteen years,* I say, and he stares at me in surprise:

*Yes, that's something.*

*Don't I deserve a medal?* I say defiantly.

Yoram turns his direct gaze on me. *We should sit down together and discuss it like two adults.* *I have no intention of enriching divorce lawyers.*

*Me neither.*

Poor thing, so brave in really hard moments, so fragile in good times. Why didn’t you yell, drenched in salty tears: What are you doing, what did I do to you? Don’t leave me – tell me – why, why, why?

*Fine. We’ll divide up the assets, like two adults,* I say. And after a moment’s silence:

*Is there someone else?*

*Why do you have to be so banal? No, I don’t have someone else.*

My urge to ask: why is it suddenly so urgent when it’s been limping on for so many years, is replaced for outward show by ‘*How are we going to divide it up?*’

*You wanted a house in Zikhron, didn’t you?* He smiles. *I'm staying in the city.*

*That's acceptable.*

*But the option of selling both houses and dividing the cash still*
remains.

That depends on the circumstances. If they change.
They're sure to change.

Who actually said that prophetic sentence? Neither of us is willing to own up.

Two years later, when I returned to Tel Aviv, for the battle from which I would emerge bodiless, the option became a white flag of surrender.

I don't intend to sell at recession prices. There won't be enough cash left for two apartments in the city.

And I don't intend to stay up in the north, in Zikhron.
But I work here. I must remain in town.
And I must have medical treatment.
Aren't there plenty of doctors in Haifa?
Aren't you ashamed to be arguing with me?
What's there to be ashamed of? We have to be rational. As if women don't get cancer north of Tel Aviv.

And now that he's uttered the explicit word, and I know that I'm alone in the world, without children to protect me, without a man at my side, I rear up on my hind legs, and instead of wailing -
How did a tender, clever woman like me end up in this situation? -
I clutch metaphorically at the few curls left to me, and pull myself out of the swamp with one mighty effort:

I'm not even going to argue. Rent an apartment for yourself and I don't care where. Next week I'm returning to our house on Horkanus Street.

And that was what I did. A truck and movers and determination.

Deeds not words.
That's the language you have to use with them. Force, that's all they understand.
Chapter 3: Don’t Worry, Be Happy

I board the 912 bus to Zikhron Yaakov, Pardes Hanna and Haifa after a sleepless night. From a window seat, two rows from the back, I look out at the dunes along the coastal plain with eyes detached from optic nerves. A bowed acacia tree, cedars, an orange grove shielded by eucalyptuses from sudden gusts of wind. Snapshots from a journey that Dorit asked, begged, pleaded with me not to take.

Why do you need to see a house from donkey’s years ago just for that lousy project? Isn’t there enough material in the municipal library? I want to get a feel for the period. Their furniture, what they wore, where they hid the weapons, the flash lamps?

Rubbish, she says. You probably just want to see him.

No way! An old man like that.

Be careful, she says, and promises to tell my parents and anyone looking for me after school that I’m at her place.

Yehoyada, waiting beneath the awning of the newspaper store across the street, waves a hand to call my attention, and as I approach him, smiling, his expression is blank.

Take the newspaper from me, he whispers hastily, his lips barely moving. Follow me at a distance so that we won’t be seen together. When we reach the crossroads, ignore me, turn right and take the first on the left. The fourth house from the corner, brown-tiled roof. I’ll be waiting there. He is gone, leaving me clutching the newspaper.

Back to the bus station, immediately! That’s what Grandma Knows Best hisses at me – but she can’t talk and I won’t listen.

Even now, here in bed, on an air mattress to prevent pressure sores, I can conjure up my affront. What was it after all; just a study trip to the Aaronson house. And what happened?

Did I really not know?
Looking back now, that girl’s naiveté looks like make-believe. Of course you knew, I say to her, you knew everything. And nonetheless you went. Agog, provocative, heated-up, your imagination picturing dozens of possibilities and your brain ignoring them.

Otherwise what are you doing, striding ten yards behind him, darting glances in all directions like a veteran secret agent, at the heavy houses behind green hedges, the dereliction, a harrow lying on its side in a yard, a weed-ridden gravel path leading to another yard. At the crossroads he walks straight on, glances back at you and inclines his head to the right to remind you of the direction. *I knew I didn’t have to remind you*, he says later when he opens the door, lurking behind the narrow crack in a way that will become familiar to you, opening it before you have time to knock.

A clever girl walks into a gloomy corridor furnished with a large bureau, smells a combined odor of stuffiness and fragrant soap. Her body is tensed to the fingertips, focused on what awaits it, a rapid, decisive headlong plunge into an unknown future.

A clever foolish girl walks into a strange house in a strange town, into a living room crammed with heavy furniture, embellished with rose-carved feet and lion-headed fronts, and gazes at the embroidered protective covers on armchairs, table tops and shelves. She notes the accumulated dust, the empty mantelpiece, the black marble bust. *Who is it?*

*That’s Alexander*, he says. *Do you want to drink something?*

*No, no.*

*It’s by Hanna Orloff. Look at those strong features. Have you ever seen a picture of Aaron?*

*Yes.*

*Hair combed back, aquiline nose, and those eyebrows? Set in a slight frown, like his mother’s, looking defiantly at the world. Heavy-necked, a bull confined in a suit, a pensive, arrogant expression, but it’s concealing a smile which few people were privileged to see. Artists took*
pleasure in drawing and sculpting him.

Was that the first time that I noticed Yehoyada’s unique style, the breathless speech, the words pouring out at a touchingly rapid pace. Only years later would I come to mock it.

Now drink something.

He takes my hand and I do not pull away, leads me to the kitchen and opens a giant US-made refrigerator, a rarity in our surroundings. Bottles of fruit juice, mineral water and milk stand on the otherwise empty shelves.

The soft drink is too sweet to quench my thirst and Yehoyada, laughing, pours me another generous glassful, takes a step back, scans me at length and decides: Go and take a shower, you’ll feel fresh. And a second later: You can lie down and rest. It must have been a tiring journey.

Oh, if only Dorit were here!

On all my later trips abroad and even when I built my dream house in Zikhron Yaakov, I never saw a bathroom like it nor could I have afforded one. I was struck by its beauty. A vast, gleaming black bath, a black washbasin perched on a swanlike stand, gold-plated taps, both delicate and solid, a black marble floor and in the corner two toilets, also black. The soft milky glow of hidden lights gave this somber picture the frozen lightness of a medieval painting.

You can take a bath, he says behind me. Is he amused by the provincial girl who thought she was visiting the back of beyond and discovered, to her astonishment, that she is right in the center of the world?

Trying to decipher my confused expression, he holds out a hand and smiles: Don’t make any mistakes, young lady, that is a toilet and this is a bidet. Out of nowhere he produces two soft, fluffy beige towels. Whatever you fancy, child, he whispers, feel at home.

And that isn’t all. There is an ivory-colored couch, too large for two and too small for three. The windowpanes are etched
with roses and the silk drapes match the couch. There is a folding cherry-wood screen carved with cherubs and roses, and on the open wooden shelves miniature bottles, soaps and perfumes. What does this room have in common with ordinary bathrooms, with white basins, plain toilets and baths, barely large enough for one medium-sized individual, intolerably functional spaces with a hygienic gleam and an odor of pungent bleach? What is little, wonderful, Dana to do when faced with such splendor.

Such opulence, I add now, the sumptuousness, which enables its owner to live apart, unique in a densely-populated world, to be raised above the common lot. Little, inconsequential, Dana.

The decision, if such there was, was easily taken. My actions flow under their own momentum, like the notes in a Chopin prelude.

Locking the door, I discover two velvet bathrobes hanging behind it. Leaning over the giant black bath, I turn on the faucet, look for a plug and some sweet-smelling soap, and as the water pours out noisily, whipping and foaming the various fragrant liquids I’ve added, I use the toilet at length, examine the second toilet, which has several rinsing apertures, drop my clothes on the couch, and sink with a sigh of satisfaction into the hot water, yielding to the luxurious sensation which engulfs me from the tips of my toes to my head. I say to myself, if he tries to come in, I’ll yell.

He didn’t try.

And I didn’t yell.

Soft music drifts in from beyond the door, a Dvorzak concerto, he’ll tell me later, and I abandon myself to relaxation, afraid to look at my breasts bobbing in the water. My dense pubic hair, as yet untouched by others, is hidden beneath the peaks of foaming bubbles. If it depends on me, I think with newfound decisiveness, when I come out of here we’ll make straight for the Aaronson house. Because this house is certainly not the place that I vaguely
remember visiting with my class.

*Everything, all right?* Professor Yehoyada asks outside the locked door.

*Yes,* I answer hastily, torn abruptly out of my drowsy state.

*Are you managing? Have you got everything you need?*

*Yes, yes.*

*May I come in? I’ve brought you a glass of wine.*

Did I or did I not say ‘no’? And if I did, was it heard. Concealed by the tiny, floating bubbles, I remember a key sentence: Don’t be afraid, learn to enjoy.

The door opens, Oh God, I could swear that I locked it. He comes in and, despite the bubbles covering me, I slide further down, as if that’s possible, my hands shielding the wrinkled, pink nipples of a girl who has never been with a man, and he stands there in his smooth dazzling white shirt, a miniature wood and ivory coffee table in one hand and a tall glass in the other, smiling as if we were two drifting guests who have found one another at a cocktail party, casts a penetrating look at me, gazes deep into my eyes, sets down the glass and whispers in his mellifluous voice: *This isn’t plain wine, this is champagne. Drink it, learn to enjoy yourself,* and goes out.

*Goes out.*

Relief and disappointment are flooding me, prickling me. Suppressing them, I sip the champagne. Dozens of tiny sour-sweet bubbles burst suddenly, sliding down my throat. So this is the good life, I think to myself.

The right life.

I emerge from my bath, white-hot as the sun, flushed like a rose, honey-gold, and wrap myself in a soft bathrobe, fragrant with unrecognized perfumes, redolent with the unknown, with anticipation. I will never succeed in recapturing them despite years of tireless searches.

*Why don’t I put on my white cotton underpants, cloth*
brassiere, light-blue denim skirt and loose flannel shirt? What stops me from returning to Dana nama, Dana kama, the good little girl? The empty champagne glass in one hand, the bathrobe closed tightly, I go out into the living room, flushed, hair disheveled, stretch out a hand to him and say: Can I have some more?

What a question? He jumps up from his chair, gazes at me with interest as he pours from a thick-waisted bottle, brushes a hand over my long curls, touches my neck gently, and asks in a low voice: How about going to bed for a little rest?

I have no words. Neither yes nor no. A girl without words goes into the bedroom, to a vast bed with seven high pillows and a multitude of feather comforters. He lifts the white, smooth coverlet, its corners decorated with mysterious epigrams and embroidery as convoluted as a rose. Get in, child, he says, covering me gently, goes over to the wide window and draws the heavy curtain. In the ensuing darkness, the pleasant warmth, the pampering softness, every nerve in my body is aware of his weight on the springs on the other side, his confident, calm slow move towards me, the delicate, hard, cold hand touching, lightly stroking the bathrobe, untying the belt. You must be hot, he says, stating rather than asking, the cover is too heavy. Take it off, it's not needed.

There's no Dana. Dana nama, she's sleeping, Dana meta, she's dead. Dana is frozen. Delicately, lingering, waiting, continuing, he pushes the bathrobe back, encountering bare skin and his breathing grows heavy.

Dana, he whispers, Dana.

Dana nama. Dana meta.

The hand moves upward. It brushes the navel, gropes towards the breasts, cups the right breast from below, seeks its root, holds its fullness, his fingers caressing the left breast, and as they crawl up to the nipple, drawing ever-decreasing circles around it, I can feel the cloth of his shirt, the cuff is creased against my flesh, the bare fingers are touching my skin, sending tremors through me that will
become familiar.

Dana awakens.

No, she says.

Shhhh, he replies.

No, she repeats.

Shhh, enough, he says.

Dana.

Then he moves up to my neck and down again, delicately kneading the right breast, shifting to the left one, flattens them with a touch of violence and slips down between them to my belly, a spread palm lingering on the tight swell and continuing firmly down to the groin. He jolts into life my vocal chords, Dorit’s cautions, the self-protective instincts of a frozen, dumb young virgin. Dana khakhama, Dana avuda. Dana is clever, Dana is lost.

No! Stop! Not there.

Professor Yehoyada is lying on his side in the wide bed, his head propped on his left hand, right hand lying motionless on the roundness of my belly, his fingertips on the coarse pubic curls. Quietly he asks:

Do you have a boyfriend?

I’ve already told you, no.

Dana is faintly offended.

Are you a virgin?

Yes.

After a pause, he continues:

I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.

Is that why I call him the Seducer?

Well-known, distinguished, prosperous and elderly. Why don’t I call him the scoundrel? Why not dirty old man?

When winter senses that its end is near, it yearns for spring, for Avishag the Shunamite. She is there for him like Simone de Beauvoir’s girl students, sent to Sartre, who, embalmed in his
clothes, caressed their naked flesh,

Do you sleep with Ora? I ask suddenly.

Ora? He draws back a little and sits on the edge of the bed.

Which Ora?

My teacher, Ora Efrat.

Ah, Ora Sternhof, he smiles. Yes, I did, but not any more. Now that I have you…

I won’t sleep with you, I tell him. I’ll only sleep with whoever’s going to be my husband.

That’s fine, he says. I already envy him.

And then he slips the bathrobe back onto my body, ties the belt gently, not before adding: It’s years since I saw breasts like yours.

Then too, in his office, sitting beside me after his wife has left, interrogating me about every detail, every scrap of thought, he does not forget to compliment me.

All the boys must be crazy about you.

Not at all.

And your commanding officers?

All screwed-up. Outside the army, I wouldn’t give a shit for them.

Don’t talk slang, he says, scandalized.

What do you want me to say? That in civilian life I wouldn’t give them a second look?

Why not? If we don’t respect our language, if people like you, high school graduates, and one day you’ll be more than that, don’t speak properly, what will become of the language? There’s no country without a culture, no culture without a language.

And for an instant he could be Moshe Horvitz, Aaron Aaronson’s private bible teacher in Zikhron Yaakov, yearning to revive the Hebrew language, both written and spoken. He writes to his pupils in Hebrew, and asks them to do the same. Do not be seduced by French culture, he writes to Aaron, who has been sent to study agriculture in France.
If there is an age gap between us, it is embodied in that moment. It reminds me afresh that forty-two years add up not only to wrinkles and accumulated wisdom but also to experiences I have not yet had, consolations I have not yet enjoyed, distant struggles.

Sagas in whose light, a new generation is raised. The second generation of redemption.

Ora Efrat summons me for a personal talk in her little cubbyhole next to the staff room.

*Did you meet with Professor Yehoyada?* She looks at me directly. Is there a lie detector in her eyes?

*He turned me down.*

*Turned you down?* She repeats, shocked.

*He said he might send me a bibliographical list by mail.*

*Strange. That's not like him.*

As she gazes at me in surprise, I think I glimpse a gleam of gratification, confined to the eyes, not reaching her mouth, as if she were summing up, to her satisfaction, the results of an inner debate.

*I went to his office, in Maneh Street. I told him you sent me.*

*That's more logical,* she says, watching me.

*But then he refused to help. He told me to tell you that he's a bad person.*

*Oh, by no means,* she says, and from the tone of her voice I realize that her pain is alive and ever-present.

*I was his student,* she says suddenly, unconsciously twisting her wedding ring. *He is a very learned man.*

*I mixed up the names, Alexander and Aaron,* I go on, and he was angry.

*Yes,* she smiles, *that's just like him. But don't take it to heart. I'll talk to him.*

*No, no,* I reply hastily, my voice rising, *I don't want you to.*
You’ve given up the idea of the project, she asks, taken aback.
No. I went to the municipal library. I found a lot of material.
That’s good, she says approvingly. Which books are you using?
I can’t remember now, I say, embarrassed. I didn’t write the titles down. I’ll bring you the names to our next class.
Are you sure? Perhaps you should change your subject? There are so many other subjects in the history of the Yishuv with more accessible source material.
No, I want Nili, I am practically shouting and then I abruptly fall silent, afraid that I may have said Yehoyada instead of Nili.

In the illustration in the book, Aaron’s eyes are dark, Yehoyada’s are pale. Aaron’s gaze is focused and confident; Yehoyada’s eyes dart, gaze penetratingly and demandingly, revealing undercurrents of innocence and lust. Their smiles are similar.

In 1915, aged 26, fluent in English, Alexander was sent from Turkish-ruled Palestine to establish contact with the British. In Beirut he boarded the Des Moines, an American warship and reached Alexandria through Piraeus. His younger sister, Rivka, went with him. Their Spanish passports roused the suspicions of the British authorities who decided to deport them to Greece. After a Palestinian banker intervened, the British permitted them to disembark.

It was wartime and any foreigner was considered an enemy and the Jewish minority in Palestine was less important to the British than the Arab majority. Alexander, a man of words – all his life he was to write articles, research studies and books – chose to exploit his talent: he published a knowledgeable article in the Egyptian Gazette on the deteriorating state of the Turkish armed forces, on their tenuous foothold in Palestine, the negative balance of arms and fuel, their economic plight. His articles, published anonymously, brought him to the attention of Major Newcomb of British military intelligence.

The Major, however, preferred to back the Arab revolt, and was not persuaded by the forceful Jew. What was it that repelled him? The
smile, which was both ironic and sensual? Alexander’s overweening confidence? His Germanic-sounding name? His expensive attire?

For several weeks his fellow conspirators waited in vain for Alexander to return from Egypt. Occupying themselves with measuring and surveying the coast in anticipation of a British landing, they decided to establish contact with the British once again. This time it was Avshalom who boarded the Des Moines and roamed the streets of Alexandria, penniless, finally finding his way to a junior British intelligence officer, Leonard Woolley, with whom he drew up detailed plans—which later turned out to be insufficient and unauthorized—for the establishment of a Jewish espionage network in Palestine.

For Leonard Woolley, an archaeologist who had worked on digs in Palestine, and was later to excavate Ur, the Holy Land was his life’s work, testimony in sand and stone and not merely a battleground and words.

Woolley the archaeologist and hungry Avshalom, confident Alexander. Who am I to attach those adjectives to them?

What is it about Nili that captivates me to the extent that I am willing to render up my body for it? Or perhaps the reverse is true: what is it about Yehoyada which enslaves me so that I am willing to continue researching Nili?

At first he tends to torment me. That morning in Zikhron Yaakov, in the fourth house on the right with the brown tiled roof, when I first discover that thousands of tiny mouths begging for touch are sprouting on my skin, he gets up from the bed and pulls the curtains apart with two abrupt movements. Disturbing light bursts into the bedroom, revealing that nothing has happened, immediately filling it, illuminating Yehoyada: his hair tousled, eyes fixed on me as I stand clutching the belt of the bathrobe, confused, disheveled.

Do you remember the page you prepared for last Tuesday?
Yes, I say, chastised.
Well then, how many sons did Ephraim Fishel Aaronson bring to Palestine?

Only one, Aaron, he was six.

Good. Well then, Aaron was six when he arrived, and we may assume that a six-year-old doesn’t travel alone. The textbooks say that he came with his parents, and we may assume that textbooks are not wrong. But what made you think that he was the only child they brought?

It said so.

It said nothing of the sort; he rebukes me with a finality that will also become familiar to me. The parents brought two sons, Aaron and Zvi, but nobody takes any interest today in Zvi, Zvi has disappeared. Why don’t you write about him. You wanted to be an innovator, didn’t you? he mocks me and continues: If you intend to make use of me and write about Aaron or Alexander, whatever you decide, just don’t repeat those mistakes.

But you said, “Fine” when I finished reading it out.

Did I? Really? And his expression changes suddenly, revealing a new tenderness. You must have befuddled me, he smiles. Go and dress yourself, child.

I emerge from the bathroom in my cotton underpants and cloth brassiere, denim skirt and flannel shirt, dressed and alien and superfluous and he looks at me and says: I promised you a meal overlooking a stunning view, but it’s late. What will they say at home?

It’s OK, I’m not hungry, I lie.

And so we part, my lowered gaze, his smile: You’re not angry, are you?

And he gives me a paternal kiss on the mouth, without tongue or saliva. On the bus, troubled and hungry, despite the peanut snack from the kiosk outside the bus station, going over the events of the day, staging each gesture afresh in slow motion, I decide with relief that even if I was mistaken and Dorit was right, I still haven’t crossed the threshold between girlhood and womanhood.
Chapter 4: The Body is a Gift

My return from Zikhron to Tel Aviv is vivid in my memory: the driver’s stare, the sparse number of passengers up to the main highway, the stops along the route – all eyes on me, scratching the thin skin. The flannel shirt rubs against me, the denim skirt is heavy. I see in my mind’s eye immaculately-groomed women, smoothing rich fragrant creams into their skin, their nails gleaming with dark-red polish, their long, smooth legs stretched out, inviting caresses.

Will I ever be like them? I even find it painful to shave my legs. 

*It’s not worth it*, I tell Dorit. *Why suffer in order to be beautiful, do they do anything to themselves for our sake? They work all their lives*, she says, *and we can stay at home. Who wants to stay at home*, I fume. *Well, of course not. I don’t want to either, but we don’t have to work and they do.*

*That still doesn’t justify shaving legs.*

But still we make an appointment with Benny on Pinkas Street, climb four flights of stairs and there, on a narrow couch covered in a worn sheet, we strip to shorts and he heats a concoction of yellowish-brown wax, spreads it on our calves with a wooden tongue depressor, then smoothes on long, narrow strips of cloth. After a few minutes, when they are sufficiently dry, he lifts the edges with a fingernail in the opposite direction to the hair growth and rips them off painfully, yanking out roots, together with a layer of dead skin, brown hairs and here and there a healed scab.

One strip after another, the nerve ends still quivering from the pain of the first strip when the second is pulled off. *Give me a minute’s break, please*, Dorit begs. *Do it fast*, I beg in my turn, afraid of the wait for pain, which is worse than the pain itself. Benny
hastens to smooth onto our reddened calves antiseptic cream and then talcum powder and asks, ever hopeful, don't you want to do the thighs as well? Disappointed, he accepts our usual refusal together with the money, and goes off to wash his hands as we flee into the street, breathing a sigh of relief, feeling like plucked hens.

These days my calves are hairless, although the hair on my head has grown again. And though the timing is awry, and memory and imagination are indistinguishable, it is still pleasant to assume that even before falling sick I was free of that particular torture. When I was with Uri, on principle I never removed hair, and after I married Yoram, the Bedrock, it became a habit to shave, appropriating one of his mechanical razors, rinsing the clumps of hair off the blade, resting a naked, soaped leg on the edge of the bath, skimming from ankle to knee, after each stroke rinsing away the long hairs, watching them slide and disappear down the plughole. By the time the Bedrock bought a non-scratch state-of-the-art electrical shaver which left no stubble behind, adapted itself to the shape of his face and, amazingly enough, did everything the advertisements promised, and he handed over all his mechanical razors to me, I no longer needed them. Here and there a single long hair sprouted, occasionally several, but they no longer showed through my pantyhose, because by then who bothered to wear sheer nylons held up with black or red garters like those the Seducer bought, or perhaps I bought for myself?

Four days after my trip to Zikhron Yaakov, an envelope with a university logo was awaiting me at home.

What's this letter? my mother queries.

Aren't you going into the army? My father asks, remote as usual. Don't tell me you've applied for the army academic studies program?

They conduct a symposium over the long white envelope addressed to their only child.
It's probably the bibliography for my matriculation project. My heart leaps at the sight of the signature on the back of the envelope.

Good, my father says, but don't you think it might be worth applying for the academic program and then you can serve as an officer with a degree?

What an idea! Says my mother. That's not for girls.

I'm not talking to you, he says, I'm talking to her.

A woman needs to get married and have children, not spend six years in the army, she continues, ignoring him, and I snatch the letter from her hand and make a rapid exit.

In my unloved room, on the couch with the colored cushions chosen by my mother, and a poster of two kittens playing with a ball, a present from Dorit, I open the envelope eagerly.

My dear Dana, long, slanting letters written in dark blue ink, here is the bibliography I promised you. If you can't find the first three in the library, I am willing to lend them to you. As for the others, Mr. Wallach at the municipal library in Ahad Haam Street will be happy to help you find them. I've spoken to him about you. I too will be happy if you contact me. Waiting, yours, Yakir.

Yours, Yakir. I reread those final words. Not Professor, not Yehoyada, Yakir! Yours, he writes. Is he mine or am I supposed to be his?

I'm still not his and never will be. Flatterer. If he thinks that I'm going to contact him, he's mistaken. Twice he invited me on false pretexts, once to take a long trip, and for what? It's all excuses.

Rereading the last lines, I stand in front of the mirror on the closet door. Contact me! I didn't know it was called contact. I lift my hair, pull it back into a chignon, enjoy the sight of my elongated neck. Do you know, the girl in the room smiles at the girl in the mirror, the professor is waiting for you. Let him wait.

That evening I showed Dorit the letter, which was already stained with perspiration and coffee.
It’s because you didn’t let him, she says. They respect girls who don’t let them.

I don’t think I’ll contact him.

And what about the project?
I’ve got all I need, what I don’t have I can do without.

And you can always change your subject, she says.

Yes, I confirm, I can always give it up and take the exam, like everyone else.

And we both smile, light-hearted, enjoying a relaxed evening, in an atmosphere of affection and togetherness, to be preserved in small doses as provisions for the life ahead. A friendship, which needs no clarifications. An evening of: Come on; let’s take in a movie, and, after lengthy debate, we decide on Nights of Cabiria. Dorit throws over my shoulder the long scarf with a shell-like pattern she crocheted for her mother; I kiss her pink, smiling cheek, leaving a red mark which fades gradually, and arm in arm we skitter down Ben Yehuda Street. The leather couches in the furniture stores hold out the promise of a happy life, kitchen cabinets conceal family secrets, the vast windows of a big store display imported electrical goods and hint at other opportunities, but we halt at the patisserie, drooling at the display of Black Forest gateau, lemon meringue pie and cheesecake with strawberries.

When I have my first real boyfriend, Dorit sums up; I’ll bring him here and order three pastries. If he pays for all three, I’ll know that he’s the one.

Next morning I go to the municipal library, a building adorned with balconies with elaborate ironwork balustrades. After some hesitation I find the entrance, concealed behind garbage cans and scaffolding, mount steps smoothed by the traffic of years and follow an authoritative arrow directing me to the periodicals room.

An elderly man, in wrinkled pants, a shirt with dingy grey cuffs and lapels and a woolen sweater, frayed from numerous
washings, is sitting at one of the wide partitioned tables. Absorbed in a newspaper, his lips moving, he doesn’t raise his head. There is nobody else in the room and I go over to the counter, as dark and heavy as the tables, waiting for Mr. Wallach or someone else, and meanwhile surveying the thick, slanting wooden shelves along the walls where periodicals and newspapers await their readers.

Quiet, please, demands an anonymous sign. The librarian at the counter can answer any questions, advises another sign. But the librarian isn’t there.

*Excuse me, where is Mr. Wallach?* I ask the reader, whose lips continue to move silently but he still ignores me.

*Sir? Excuse me.*

Eventually he raises his head and his eyelids are crusted, with a wart on the left one. He looks at me in surprise and returns to his newspaper, printed in large letters in basic Hebrew. **Omer,** the newspaper for new immigrants, I shrug contemptuously, but then he raises his head again. The wrinkles on his cheeks move. An angry, cloudy gaze, dilated pupils in musty pale blue eyes staring at me: *Wallach not here.*

*Then where is he?*

Absorbed again, he seeks his place on the newspaper column with his finger.

*Where’s Wallach?* I insist.

The head refuses to budge a third time, I make a rapid tour of the shelves, perhaps they hold some old-time periodicals, but apart from several modern literary journals, I see only today’s newspapers in several languages. After what seems to me a polite interval, I flee the room with a feeling of relief and make for the nearby Shalom department store to roam its aisles.

*I need to contact him,* I tell Dorit. *I couldn’t find Wallach. I’ll go to him and collect the book and that’s that.*

*Shall I come with you?*
As I ponder the possibility, deep shame suddenly floods me. There's nothing to see there, I say, it's not worth your while. Just an old man.

OK, have it your own way, says Dorit. It's your funeral! I'd only be coming for your sake.

It'll be OK, I promise us both. Let's call him now.

We slip out of school to the public telephone at the corner, enthusiastic accomplices in crime. I take out the token which has been nestling in my pocket all morning, insert it, dial the number, and the ringing tone is accompanied by an urgent pounding of the heart which only I can hear. Nobody answers.

I'll try again this evening, I say, relieved, and Dorit is already glancing at her watch. Let's go back, recess is nearly over.

Hallo?
It's me.
Who is me? Asks the warm, resonant, self-aware voice.
Dana.
Dana! He comes to life. Did you receive the list?
Yes, Wallach wasn't there.
Who wasn't there?
You know, the librarian.
Where?
At the library.
Impossible. He sounds surprised. He was born there and lives there and he'll probably die there, he adds after a moment’s pause.
But I was there yesterday at lunchtime. He wasn't there. There was only one old man.

I stop abruptly. That word suddenly sounds inappropriate.
Where exactly were you, he asks, and again I am on firm ground. The erring pupil, the knowledgeable teacher, the all-powerful authority.

In the periodicals room.
The periodicals room, he repeats, fine. Will he always say ‘fine’ before the next stab? The periodicals room or the archive?

Archive?

Certainly. Did you really think that a periodical like Hazvi from the beginning of the century would be out on the shelf waiting for you?

Hatzvi?

Never mind. Have you found the books? he asks after a pause.

Not yet.

Do you want to come and collect some?

No, yes.

No, yes or yes, no. I hear his laugh.

I…the words won’t come.

Then tomorrow at five. The book will be waiting on my desk.

He cuts off the conversation before there’s time to explain that a book is fine, and facts are fine too and acquiring knowledge is wonderful, but nothing else. The last three words are uttered to the silent phone.

At five o’clock next day, having tried on corduroy pants and a suede skirt, I revert hesitantly to my denim skirt, matched with a blue cotton blouse with a fitted waist. Reflected in the mirror, slim and light, airy and evasive, I like my look.

When will you be back, take a coat, Imma shouts from the kitchen.

To collect a book. I won’t be long.

Emerging into the grey street, the sky sliding into evening, I board the no. 18 bus, and five minutes before the scheduled time I am outside his door. It opens before I knock.

How did you know? I say in surprise, panting, forgetting to greet him.

Professor Yehoyada points to the spy-hole in the door. I was waiting for you, he smiles, peeping out.

How did he know what words would melt a marshmallow
girl convinced that her bones are steel? How did he accustom the chestnut, olive, almond girl to reveal emotions that no other male had yet managed to elicit?

Entering his office for the third time, I look around with a measuring gaze. Tightly crammed bookshelves, expensive upholstery, a streamlined glass ashtray, a small glass coffee table.

*Sit down;* he waves a hand at the couch. *There's the book,* gesturing towards his desk. His shirt is still dazzling white. *Will you permit me to sit beside you?*

As I shift a little to make room, perhaps to show reluctance or to gain time, he sits down, his hand on my hair. *What curls, he says.* *Many women pay the earth...* *I prefer straight hair.*

He observes me with a smile: *Really?* His expression is as appreciative as if I’d just delivered a brilliant lecture on the history of the Medici family.

*We always love what we haven't got,* he nods, *but I prefer you like this, curly-headed.*

*I expect your boyfriend also prefers you like this,* he adds, casting a slanting look at me.

*I don't have a boyfriend,* I told you.

*Don't be so defensive,* he looks me in the eye. *Are you angry? At me?*

Leaning, pressed against the couch arm, my back protected, I look back at him, at the green and grey sparks in his eyes, the delicate laugh-lines around them.

*Don't be angry,* he says, twisting a curl round his finger. *I can read your expression.*

His lower lip protrudes slightly, the expression of a pampered child. Making an effort, I look straight at him, noting the thinness of the upper lip, the downward turn of the mouth, focusing on the touch of his hand on my hair, which is taking on life, developing sensors.
Look at me, he says, lifting my chin, don't run away, and my body sinks back, an unfamiliar weight pinning it down. Unmoving, completely inert.

Dana, he utters my name, his eyes no longer on mine, his hands flitting from chin to neck, gently stroking the skin below, lingering on the meeting-place of shoulder and chest, moving in ever-expanding circles like some inescapable voodoo ritual.

You permit this, don't you, he whispers, and my body cries out. Blood rushes to places unfamiliar to me, blood I never knew before. Uncontrollable quivers begin in my thighs and ascend my back.

My sweet, good little girl, he murmurs and his hands begin to undo the buttons of my blouse from top to bottom, lingering on each buttonhole, calm, measured, continuing to the next. A white brassiere assails my vision though I avoid looking at it, above it the swell of my breasts. Gleaming flesh, which is intolerable to me.

Wonderful, he says, wonderful Dana, come here, and he pulls my burning, rigid body towards him, the body which isn't mine.

Did he really pull me or did I move of my own volition? With uncoordinated movements, my body spreads out beneath his hands. I split into the girl hovering, alarmed, over the couch, looking down and the girl below, body surrendering, shirt gaping open, brassiere up around her neck, breasts yearning for the touch of the white hand whose soft-hard imprint they first felt a week ago.

Isn't this good, Dana? He cups his hands around my breasts, strokes with an upward movement. My Mount Sinai, he says, his lips on my nipples. Dana.

The girl above the couch begins to merge with the girl below. I want you so much, he says again.

Eyes closed, tremors crawling up my body, making my flesh quiver—

You're cold; he looks up from my breasts to my face.
No, the voice is not mine, strange, a kind of whimper or sigh, and he moves back, looks at me, inspecting the battlefield where I sprawl, entirely defeated, crucified and disjointed, and smiles: Stay like that. I want to fix the sight in my memory. If I were a poet, he adds after a brief silence, I'd write a poem now.

I find the words again. I'm cold, I say, and movement returns. With trembling hands I restore the brassiere to its proper place, insert the breasts which are no long my property, and when I begin to button my shirt, he is there.

Let me.

Slowly, with cradling movements, sneaking a caress here, a stroke there, he buttons it, and at the last button he leaves his hands on my breasts, each palm resting on a curve and says with absolute ownership: The body is a gift which God gives us. We mustn’t fight it, Dana.

At the age of forty-five, menses ended after radiation treatment, my breasts have turned into empty sacks. When they are not held in place by my brassiere, they sag down like jellyfish. They would retreat into my body like testicles if they could, but we females lack male privileges. We carry them, exposed: first they bud, then they protrude erect and insolent, until they fill with milk and empty out, exposed to the cold air, their delicate skin goose-fleshed. Bluish veins, one long, random hair beside the nipple. The history of the breast in four lines. When Vicky washes me, seating me on a plastic chair in the bath in my new-old house, I lift them and she scrubs beneath with a sponge.

Meticulously observing daily hygiene, I guard what is left of my life as sanely as possible. The delicate skin under my breasts has thickened over the years, peeling and coarsened by sweat. I lift them one by one, and she dips the sponge in the liquid soap. I lift, she rubs. I drop them and she adds soap. I lift and she scrubs. The smell of sweat disappears and is replaced by the fragrance of
cleanliness. I lift and she rinses. Again and again. Neither sweat nor soap under the hollow sacks, which never suckled a child, only men, but nonetheless are now empty of desire and of flesh.

I rinse my genitals myself. A weary, nerveless hand moves back and forth with the soapy sponge, Vicky directs the flow of the faucet, which pours out liquid instead of words. No more baths, no more comforting immersion in a warm womb, only harsh, purposeful showers. When we are finished, she wraps me in a bathrobe and bears me to bed in the heated room. There she massages my back, my shoulders, my legs with sesame oil, and her hands knead each buttock once, twice. Then she turns me onto my back, oils neck and breasts, evading the nipples, rubs my belly, careful not to come too close to the groin as she oils my thighs.

In the warm and pleasant room, a foreign mother diapers an overgrown infant. And were it not for the buoyant sturdiness of her hands and my empty eyes, I would weep.

Between one and two every day is bathing time and at two thirty Vicky’s rest period begins. Strict about timetables, she has asked if she can start washing me early, so she can dry and massage and put the cleaned, wrapped bundle to bed. Vicky needs her rest, I don’t. What does she do in her room behind the closed door?

Don't close the door, the Bedrock scolded her when she started work, suppose Dana needs you, but as the days passed, the door began to close on its own, first just a little, then half-shut and finally completely. What is she doing behind the closed door? Reading? Sleeping? She can’t talk on the telephone, because the only instruments are beside my bed and in the living room. Her special food, pale rice and pinkish sausage whose origins I never question, she eats immediately after feeding me. What is left for her to do? The detective novels in English that Yoram brings lie unopened on the bookcase in the hall. Can she be writing? On our few ventures outdoors, she pushing my wheelchair, we have never even approached the post-office. What does she do in there, on
the grey convertible couch? Dream? Think about her own men? Masturbate?

*Have you ever considered that she might have children?* The Bedrock says on one of his visits, in the tone he uses for lecturing me.

So what?

*Think about it: to leave small children behind in her village and come to a distant country to look after other people's children.*

*And sick women,* I add.

*True, sick women too,* he continues unsmiling. A fact is a fact. He doesn't even try to say that the sick can recover. *Every day, 24 hours a day, like a slave.*

What do you mean, a slave, I protest. *Food and pocket money, free weekends, a lunch break…*

You don't have to tell me all that. I found her, have you forgotten? But let me ask you, have you ever worked 24 hours without a lunch break?

*She sleeps nights. You can't call that slavery.*

*Modern slavery. They go to work to send money home so the children…*

You're breaking my heart, I tell him. *Do you have a tissue? What's the money for?* I assure you it's not for food. It's so that the family in the village can buy a TV set, have a DVD, raise children who will become modern slaves, as you call it, in their turn. Just so they can buy. Buy, buy.

Wonderful, *Herbert Marcuse,* Yoram laughs. *Don't you have a grain of compassion?*

For whom?

For children left without their mother, for mothers who've left children behind.

The husband takes all the money, I reply. They live in clans here as well and somebody, a man, always a man, is in charge of the wages and manages them
If you had children, he continues, perhaps you would talk differently.
You’re sorry for her? Are you capable of pity?
Why do you turn a simple answer into a pretext for a fight, he says, irritated.
Because I don’t pity her. A mother who leaves her children doesn’t deserve pity.
How do you know how it feels to have hungry children?
Hansel and Gretel, I say, furious.
He is silent.

In the past few months I’ve discovered that I enjoy arguing with Yoram. Since I’ve been sick, he gives in easily. Why not? He comes once a week for half an hour, checks if everything is functioning smoothly and is game for a light argument, which will help him to forget me and her as soon as he steps outside.
Be thankful that he takes an interest, Dorit says. How many husbands take an interest in their ex-wives?
Especially when the ex-wives are sick, I say what she avoids saying.
And he’s not only taking an interest, he’s taking care of you. He arranged for the Filipina, all the facilities.
Nineteen years, I say, that’s no trifle.
So you think it’s only natural? Shall I tell you about husbands who leave a wife after thirty years and forty years and don’t give a damn?
What do I care what other people do. I’d look after him too if he fell sick.
I’m not sure about that, says Dorit, mother of four, four years a widow.
You’re always against me, I tell her. You have a good word for everyone in the world, but not for me.
Danush, complaints will get you nowhere, she replies in the tone she generally reserves for her children.
No, really, what do I care if some nut leaves his wife after forty years for a younger cunt. I care that I’m alone, that I have nobody.

When I fall silent and my sorrow at a life of wrong decisions evokes pain, and tears begin to gather, Dorit strokes my hair and says nothing. My best friend! Even at such hard moments she won’t lie. She won’t say I told you so, won’t promise that I’ll recover, won’t swear to look after me till death.
Chapter 5: The One-Eyed Red Stalk

Do you know how long we’ve been together? I ask Yehoyada one glistening, sweaty summer evening after the usual round of ‘Tell me’, and ‘Doesn’t everyone try to chat you up?’

Not exactly together, I add to myself.

Who else knows about us? He asks every month or so in the same words.

About a year and a half, answering my own question, about a year and a half since that trip to Zikhron.

Really? He raises a graying eyebrow, only a year and a half?

Only, only? I protest. We’ve been together for a year and a half - together and not together.

Not again, Dana, not again? What now?

Perhaps the wait in the street, the counted steps, the comfortable middle-class lifestyle glimpsed through the apartment windows were having their unwanted, inadmissible effect on me.

What will come of it, I say to him and to myself.

Only good, he laughs, everything will be all right, yih’yeh tov, isn’t that what we say here?

If everything is all right, why is nothing all right?

What’s that supposed to mean, he stiffens. Is that black army humor?

Dunno. I’m pissed off.

All the options are open, have I ever forced you? You can always leave, he says with a wave of the hand. The whiteness of his shirts no longer dazzles me. I don’t hold anyone by force.

That’s not it. I feel like crying. It’s just that I keep thinking about you, imagining you. I want to add: I roam the streets and wait for your wife to leave, leave my base without a brassiere, but I remain silent.

Love, he says quietly, it’s love, Dana, there’s nothing to be done.
Then he comes over and lifts my face. *Come here, little one,* he says, leading me to his desk and leaning me against it. A skilled hand lifts the short khaki skirt, lowers the elegant black lace underpants. *Come here,* his voice is hoarse, and he pushes me backwards, opens the zipper of his pants, dark gabardine on a hot summer day, takes out his cock, a half-erect red stalk, and tries to maneuver.

*Help me.*

As usual, I help, spreading my legs wide.

*No, hold it.*

Grasping it, practiced, I guide the sightless one-eyed and ever-ravenous head to the narrow, moist opening.

*Dana,* he repeats my name, *Dana, Dana. You’re so sweet, so wonderful.*

Taking note of each syllable, each tone, trying to be part of the game, I observe his closed eyes, his mumbling mouth, all so familiar, as his hands unbutton the army tunic, reveal and cup the heavy, firm unconfined young breasts. *You did it,* he cries in excitement, his breathing labored. *I knew you would listen to me. You’re going to learn a lot from me. My little seductress, my courtesan.* I want to believe that overwhelming currents, new worlds, new and unfamiliar pleasures await me, and not that I will merely wait for the rhythmic movements to end in two or three snorts and a hasty flight to the bathroom. They always evoke in me, surging, melancholic compassion and the warm affection that I call love, melts my heart utterly, each time anew.

*What’s sex anyway?* I say, huddling with Dorit in our smoking haven hidden from the prying eyes of teachers, as we pass a cigarette from one to the other and exchange philosophical theories about life.

More than three years ago, when we first began to share a desk, two strangers in a class where everyone had known everyone else
since the first grade, we soon discovered that we had a great deal in common.

*It’s exciting, I whisper, but not like in novels. No sparks.*

*Doesn’t the earth move?* She asks, proving she’s read Hemingway. More than a month after Zikhron Yaakov, two weeks after the first time we had real sex, I realize that I’ve fallen deeply in love.

*It’s not the sex, that’s even a little disgusting, but I can’t stop thinking about him, going back over what he said, how he looked at me.*

*And how he touched you,* Dorit adds, frowning. *It started with the sex, don’t you see? If you hadn’t gone on meeting him it wouldn’t have happened.*

*But I must see him. The project isn’t finished yet.*

The end of February, the deadline for submitting projects is at hand and Ora is threatening not to approve my paper if she doesn’t receive the first draft by next week.

*The guidelines you gave me were satisfactory,* she says, her hands smoothing her striped jacket. *The Ministry of Education has approved them, so why are you stuck now?*

*I’m not.*

In the little cubbyhole next to the staff room, I gaze at her crossed legs, in black pumps with a thin heel.

*So why haven’t you brought me the chapters you’ve written?*

*I haven’t copied them out yet.*

*How much have you written?*

*Five chapters,* the figure I throw out is not too exaggerated and not too promising.

*That’s all? If I remember correctly…* She takes a file out of her square brown portfolio and begins to leaf through it: *Where is it? Ah, here. You proposed eleven chapters. If we count the preface and bibliography and pictures, you haven’t even completed half. How are you going to finish in time?*
Right leg over left, swinging, the shoe drawing an invisible
tangent.

I don't know.

Just don't give in, she says, hastily changing her tone and
observing me at length. You're a clever girl, think about it a little and
decide how to go ahead. Have you at least finished the reading?

Yes.

Do you need a few days off school? She leans towards me, setting
her feet on the ground and smiles. We'll call it library time,

No, that's OK.

Why do I say that even before grasping the question? But even
if I change my mind and seize her offer, I know only too well that
the time won't be spent in the library, but telephoning Yehoyada.
And he, weighed down with commitments and lectures, research
projects and meetings, will say: Oh, Dana, Dana, I'm so sorry, but I
don't have time. And I'll skulk in my room, broken-hearted.

Thank you, really, I repeat, but it's not necessary.

She leans towards me again:

Has something happened, Dana? You've changed. Is there some
problem at home?

No, of course not, I say, stiffening.

She gives me a contemplative look.

You know you can always rely on me.

Of course, I smile, avoiding her eyes. Nothing's happened.

Sit down, she says (was I trying to stand up?). Have you
managed to talk to Professor Yehoyada again?

No, a hurried, cautious reply.

A pity.

Why?

He could add a great deal.

Well, that's just the point.

Standing up with a sigh of relief, I'm aware of my movements,
of the door two steps away and the need to pass by her chair.
Sit down, she says again. I want to ask you something.
Yes, I say, trying to look her straight in the eye.
I won’t be angry, but tell me the truth.
About what, I say, alarmed.
I want to understand, what…?
Suddenly, I pity her, sorry for her weakness, her surmises, reassuring or painful and perhaps both, and in any case preferable to actual knowledge.

I know he can be insulting, she says, obviously choosing her words carefully, seeking the masked words among the blatant ones: Did something special happen when you met him for the first time?
Met whom? I take refuge in innocence. Oh, you mean Professor Yehoyada? No, I told you, I mixed up the names and he was angry.
Yes, she flips her hair and the damp brown curls fall back over her forehead. You know, I mean, he can be very…Oh, never mind, it’s not important.
She stands up and moves towards the door.
Is he a good lecturer? I ask.
Very good, she replies, and again, I sympathize.
Are you still in contact?
No, why? She turns an inquisitive look on me, a different look, between equals and then retreats. He was my teacher, I told you.
She seems surprised at my smile. That was a long time ago, in the past few years I’ve had no time for contacts. I’m so busy.
The thought is intoxicating, exhilarating: He’s mine…all mine.

Tell me about the women you’ve had, I beg after a few months.
Ah, he smiles, his hand between my legs, only when you tell me about your men.
You know there aren’t any.
I’m not sure, he says, infuriating me each time anew.

How many memories are there, scenes of love, pursuing one
another in the imagination?
   So few for a whole lifetime, so fragmented.
   Not only the memories,
   I too.

   Touching and fleeing, feeling and closing up, afraid of missing the opportunity of returning to them at will, like the Mother’s Dream for example, always on the verge of fulfillment that melts away an instant before, trapped for ever in the paradox of Schroedinger’s cat. Perhaps I should go back to the barren expanses of nineteen years of good-bad, bad-good wedlock? The Coincidence comes and goes in those memories with a rhythm we created together. The Bedrock bears their weight just as Atlas bore the world. Is it surprising that I keep returning to the Seducer, sucking in strength from the incomparable first one, the one and only?

   Now that the days flow by purposelessly, and the nights have never been so black, it is amazing to realize how, small and foolish as I was, I was clever enough to abandon him at the end of his days, afflicted with yearning, longing for the contact I refused to renew. I, whose body was his temple in his twilight years, grew and flourished as his own body waned and shriveled.

   Dorit has had a boyfriend for three months, an officer she sees on his furloughs. They go to the movies, have joined a film club, they’ve seen Fellini’s 8 1/2 three times and haven’t had sex yet.
   He’s holding back, waiting for me, she says. That’s his test.
   And yours.
   We’ve decided to wait six months.
   Let’s see.

   Sometimes, going to the movies with them, joining in their weighty discussion on superfluous psychological commitments like marriage or parent-children relations, I think how much more complex my world is than hers. Sometimes, when he places a
bronzed arm around her waist and she leans her head against him
and it fits into his shoulder, I envy the growing harmony between
them as they walk together, exposed to the light of day, engaged
in trifling debate, what to eat, where to go, how to explain to their
parents that they need more money.

When school is over and the army beckons, Yehoyada tries to
give me money to rent us an apartment: “So that you’ll have a place
for nights when you’re not on guard duty; so that you can study at
the university if you want to; so that you can buy yourself lingerie,
black lace; whatever you want, I’m paying”.

Lying in bed, passing whole days when each minute is long and
the overall sum is short, it is surprising to realize that for the past
twelve good-bad, bad-good years, since he died, I haven’t thought
about him a great deal. Professor Yakir Yehoyada, my first great
love, the man who opened me up to the world and to men, has
been reduced to what he was from the outset: a transit station.

What caused it? Was it the vast age difference, which entailed
acceptance of incompatibility and loss, or the constant, gnawing
fear of being only a plaything, a sophisticated instrument he
fashioned for himself, without great effort, in order to indulge in
almost forgotten pleasures.

Clinging to self-respect or to norms which are particularly
valid, or so I’ve convinced myself, I refuse money. Dana does not
get up and go but she doesn’t sleep either. Dana lo kama vegam lo
nama. She’s not going to be someone’s mistress.

As it is, you avoid being seen in the street with me.
In an apartment of our own we would be free.
I don’t need an apartment.
We could meet more often. I’d come whenever I could.
I don’t want an apartment.

A mistress, nonetheless. I come there twice a week, wait in the
street till the light goes off, which is difficult to see by daylight,
carry out each and every one of his little requests, respond to his whims. Our joint secret is kept scrupulously. What is a mistress if not a submissive one-man woman, bound by a thousand ties, too delicate to be visible, too strong to break.

After our year and a half together, nobody but Dorit shares our secret, or so I prefer to believe. It is the nature of secrets to expand in geometrical procession, just as the sun shines and water evaporates. You tell one person, then four more know. But who takes an interest in an elderly professor of Yishuv history?

My girl friends giggle and whisper with soldiers, date engineering students, fall in love with footballers. Even Dorit, my soul mate, has found herself a young officer. Why do I cling to a man three times my age, for Heaven’s sake?

Yoram is called the Bedrock for good reason, because from our first date I knew he was trustworthy. We agreed to meet on Keren Kayemet Boulevard corner of Dizengoff.

Seven thirty. I’ll be waiting outside Café Vered. I’m known for my punctuality.

So am I.

But nonetheless, I arrived late, out of breath.

An academic fifteen minutes, not too bad, I say in a poor attempt at apology.

Why did you run?

Run? I didn’t run? He mustn’t think he’s important to me.

Shall we go in?

We go upstairs to the tables along the glass wall overlooking the boulevard. He takes off his black leather jacket; I remove my shaggy three-quarter length duffle coat, out of fashion for several years but still beloved, and we sit facing one another, smiling in confusion, until he says:

Tell me, Dana, how could anyone forget your name.
Let’s not start that. What about your name? Yoram, that’s a nerd’s name.

Really? He says, raising an eyebrow, and the ironic gesture is appealing.

Would you like some examples?

No, anyway names are unimportant, it’s the inner man that counts, isn’t it?

Certainly. What a question.

So, let’s order some pastries for the inner man.

A middle-aged waitress climbs the stairs wearily to take our order. She has a pencil behind her ear, a cliché.

A filter coffee and strudel, says the future Bedrock. How about you?

We have a chocolate gateau, the waitress declaims, with nuts. Or fresh cheesecake.

It’s hard to decide. I always find it hard to decide. Every choice has a taste of its own, color, tone. Melting or rough, sweet or crisp, nuts or raisins.

Cheesecake, no, chocolate perhaps. Yes, chocolate, I say, blushing.

Chocolate, he repeats, smiling at the waitress. What would you like to drink?

Hot chocolate. Tranquility settles in confidently.

She’s the café owner, he says. Later she’ll have help but at this time of day she’s working alone.

How do you know?

I’m in the know. I come here often.

You like cafes?

Yes.

How do you find the time?

I’m my own master, he smiles.

Ease sprouts between us like a magic beanstalk on the checked tablecloth.

Do you smoke?
No. You?
As you see.
I meant do you smoke a lot.
A pack a day.
That's a lot.
I intend to cut down.
And will you succeed?
When I decide to do something, I always succeed.

I tell him what Mark Twain said about smoking, but he replies: I've managed to cut down from a pack and a half to one pack, so there a good chance.

Quiet gratitude fills me: after Yehoyada the magician and arrogant Uri, God has supplied bedrock. Inner quiet, restraint, no palpitations, no breathlessness, just simplicity. A wide paved highway, no marble floors, no shifting sands, no narrow pathway to a nocturnal peak, but a highway, a road, a sidewalk and a home.

Months would pass before I realized that simplicity and quiet can also be the dark side of illusion, that an individual is the mirror of what we seek in him, a ladder we construct and climb, step by step, stumbling, clinging, tendril-like, granting him our own improved reflection, projecting onto him the image we have created with great effort and persistence.

What is the other if not the green lawn on the other side of the fence sprouting within us, carefully nurtured, treated with love, in a hothouse atmosphere which is either palace or jail.

How many years have to pass before restraint begins to be interpreted as obtuseness, tranquility as indifference, and the green grass turns to weeds.

Climbing and descending the ladder, inhaling memories, trying to locate my own reflection between its rungs, I ask each of my men: which of you is me, which of them is you?
Chapter 6: Yes, Dana, Yes

In Hanevi’im Street, the Street of the Prophets, the solid, four-storey buildings are shielded behind sisam trees. Their side entrances are reached by paved paths that run alongside the low stonewalls between the buildings, and there are prickly pears, and occasionally bougainvillea, in their yards.

_Nobody will disturb us_, says Yehoyada. _The apartment belongs to friends. Can you come at ten? I’ll be there already, so knock twice, wait and knock twice again so that I won’t open the door to anyone else._

Preoccupied with the technical details, I request a library day as Ora Efrat generously suggested. Should I arrive on foot, damp and sweaty or take the bus and absorb other people’s odors? And what to wear?

Nothing has been said explicitly, or even hinted. The book on his desk is in a brown envelope.

His hands are still stroking my blouse: _I suggest that you improve your English, it’s a very easy language. Whatever you don’t understand, I’ll explain. Next week?_

The ring of the telephone is startling, and he goes over to his desk, sits down and answers. In an authoritative, alien voice he schedules a meeting while I take out of the bookcase four novellas by Gnessin in a blue cover, two brown volumes of Graetz’s Jewish history, a giant red and black volume of Berdichevsky, and a history of the 1948 War of Independence. Then he is back at my side: _Next week, translate as much as you can and come with questions._

Again the phone rings, claiming his attention and, after ending the conversation, he looks at me thoughtfully: _What do you think about meeting somewhere else, where nobody will disturb us?_

Without waiting for a reply, his gaze on my face, he dictates an address: _ground floor, ceramic nameplate on the door, and if a neighbor should happen to open her door, walk up the stairs as if you_
were going to visit someone up there.
And I, who forget to bring the right notebooks to class, who mislay and forget items on shopping expeditions with my mother, stand there overwhelmed but able to repeat the details word for word.

Was it really like that? ‘Yes’, ‘no’ and ‘OK’, a foolish girl’s simple monosyllabic replies, or have the years dulled memory, highlighting the inexplicable? Where were my assertiveness, youthful determination, my blunt healthy mockery of class-mates, of smiling importuning strangers, or young males with acned skin and eyes bulging with yearning.

On the other hand, doesn’t one need an iron will and moral courage in order to conduct a secret affair with a well-known, unbelievably elderly man, nurture it for four years and another two dying years, each of them sufficient for a lifetime? The thought of the years that divided us, only a few less than my own age now, makes it seem that the story is a complete fabrication.

That first time.
One thinks about it, is repelled by it, dreams of it, fears it. Six months later, exchanging impressions with a flushed Dorit, I assure her that, nonetheless, I haven’t missed out on anything.

*I couldn’t have done it for the first time with some horny boy, who doesn’t know which hole is which*, I insist proudly. *You need someone with experience.*

*It’s entirely different*, she says, her eyes shining. *I don’t understand you. How could you?*

*I don’t understand myself either.*

What is it that melts my heart, my legs? Walking down Hanevi’im Street with sponge-like bones and flesh like butter, it seems that the whole world is watching. No no no no, twitter the
birds; careful, careful rustle the leaves, and a woman in slippers, returning with her newspaper from the kiosk, casts an accusing look.

You’re deceiving the whole world.
No, only myself.

And indeed, standing in front of the closet at home on a last minute whim, choosing new panties, white cotton with little red flowers, did I know what I was doing? Whenever you leave the house, wear new panties, says Grandma Knows Best, because who knows, there might be an accident, then your skirt will ride up and everyone will see the grayish-white strip. As the Proverbs says, blessed in the man who is always fearul, for he will be preserved from evil. New panties decorated with red flowers but plain cotton. All the rest are in the wash, Grandma, and laundry day is not till next week. As I stand at the closet, the lie expands. And if it’s acknowledged, even in retrospect, is it still a lie?

Moving along on sponge legs, not forgetting to look around in case someone is following, I enter the dim lobby. I can’t find the light switch in order to knock, but the door opens and behind it, in the narrow vestibule, stands Yehoyada in his white shirt, and pulls me into a rough embrace.

I’ve been waiting for you.

And for an instant a note of doubt is discernible in his voice, fear that I might not have come, endowing me with power, with self-assured femininity and childish confidence. I sail towards the living room, which is crammed with armchairs and oil paintings, framed canvases leaning against the walls with their backs to me. There is a smell of thinner and paint.

Their regular home is in Ein Hod, he says, and they’re living there at present. Do you want to drink something?

Again, the familiar monosyllabic speech.

Yes. What? What is there?

Club soda, apple juice, perhaps some beer, I’ll check.
Apple juice.

Intoxicated by new power, which has revealed in me realms I never knew existed, convinced that nobody ever felt like this, I follow him to the kitchen. He pours cider into a tall glass, and stands behind me while I drink, his arms around my hips and then my breasts.

I've brought the translated page, I say when I've emptied the glass, pulling free and going back into the living room.

You're right, he says with a smile, to work!

It took me a long time and I only translated the introduction, only one page, I complain in a business-like tone and hand him the sheet titled The Search for Sara, writing, erasures, more writing, even though it was copied out twice.

Is that so? he says. That's unacceptably slow.

He begins to pore over my translation of the description of the Zikhron landscape: gleaming sea, the slopes of Mount Carmel, the rocky soil, the scattered vineyards, the Aaronson home planted approximately in the middle of the twisting main road climbing the hill, with nothing modern about it, surrounded by fences and by the colorful walls of other houses. As you enter, gushes the author of the text, written ten years before I stand here watching him read, you feel as if you have lifted a curtain onto another world. It is the world of the Bronte sisters, an isolated, unusual family, people of vitality and mystery. In the Bronte romance, everyone was haunted by spirits and various afflictions but these people were marked by daring and by personal and public initiative; they were larger than life, sons and daughters of a nation bringing itself to life again.

I know what we'll do, he says, looking at me. If you translate one page at a time, just one page, and understand it, your knowledge of English will improve, and you'll see that what takes you a whole day now, will take only an hour or so in a couple of weeks.

And when I'm sixty I'll be able to translate sixty pages.
More or less, he laughs and after a pause: *When do you have to give in the paper?*
*In two months’ time.*
*That’s a problem.* He gives me a mischievous look. *But if you are a good girl, perhaps I’ll help you.*
*How?*
*I’ll dictate material from other languages.*
*Really?. That’s wonderful!* And I mean every word of it.
The page falls to the floor as he looks into my eyes, flashing intoxicating glances: *Shall we go into the other room?* he asks.

Why don’t we go into the other room, I suggested to the Coincidence. *We’re not horny children who can do it on the floor. We’re two adults who like their comfort.* He followed eagerly. Dr. Yuval Carmi, ENT specialist, who sat in the last row beside the window in the tenth grade, a skinny boy who kept pulling at his pants, and here he is, wearing a white coat, materializing before my eyes in the ER of Ichilov Hospital when I bring my father in.

*You’re not going to leave him here like that for hours!* I yell at the nurse. *Nobody has been near him! So what if he’s an old man.*
*Lady,* says an irritated voice behind me, *please leave.*

Spinning around furiously, I feel that my whole life has been preparing me for this moment. My father is breathing laboriously, gesturing to me not to make a scene: he always avoids them, so why act like this now in front of him in what I will later define as his ‘last hours’ though I don’t yet know that.

*I’ll leave after someone’s examined him, when someone here takes responsibility,* I bark at a doctor my own age, with curly hair, his eyes…

As we exchange a flash of recognition, which instantly dampens anger, he cries out:
*Dana?!*
*Yuvush?!*
We smile at one another, sudden warmth at the surprise dilating the dark pupils of his eyes, and beneath the authority figure and the white coat, skinny, quicksilver Yuval leaps out. And with the boyish image a distant night in a summer camp is reborn, a night when we strolled away from the bonfire, two straying children, and counted stars, talking till the early hours of the morning about God, does He exist or not?

Wow, I shout, it’s great to see you here. Someone told me that you were studying medicine in Italy, but I haven’t heard a thing about you for years.

And what about you? He seizes my hand, but suddenly recovers. Come along; let’s start by seeing what’s wrong with your father. We’ll reminisce later.

Pulling open the curtain shutting off the beds, in the little kingdom that isolates us from the pain in the other beds and from the nurses, he adds, casually: I’m on call. I was called to give an expert opinion but till the residents have time to look at him, tell me what’s going on.

But just then a querulous nurse arrives and tears open the curtain. Behind her stands the resident, followed by the doctor in charge, and all three enter briskly, glancing at Yuval and then at my father and me. They wear the hearty, artificial expressions of sales clerks and they begin firing questions: Right, tell us what hurts? Abba tries to sit up, his voice cracking in between laborious breaths, but still clearly understandable, and I retreat hurriedly in order to preserve his dignity and out of respect for the doctors.

Yuval, the Coincidence. He came and went at a rhythm we created together, responding to the need in both of us, disappearing and returning with a periodicity, which we tried and failed to understand.

Is it the pain that’s preventing me from focusing, or the inconceivable number of first times?
There were so many times, and I can’t return in full to any of them. It’s as if the owl snake will wake up to bite me with its eyes, secreting its poison. All-seeing, all-hearing, knowing everything retroactively and ahead of time. Every first is last, the owl snake jeers, and how can I touch them now? Will there be anything left to remember, somewhere to return to?

Vicky, I shout, Vicky!
That damned closed door.
If I fall out of bed, will she hear me? If I vomit, will she come running? White-hot iron rises from my gut to my stomach, burrows into my back with small nips that expand into waves; soon there will be a sea of them. Vi-c-ky! I shout with the vestiges of my strength, the voice scattering over the walls like hard gravel, falling without reverberations.

What, what? She is standing beside me.
It hurts, here.
Telephone? She asks.
No, bring pills!
She doesn’t move, looks at me warily.
Quick, now, hurry.
But instead of hurrying to the kitchen drawer, she goes over to the notebook where the details are recorded: names of pills, quantities, times, and comes back, embarrassed.

Not yet, she says, not time, not good.

Bring it! I want to yell, to strangle someone, but my voice emerges wounded, small, a childlike whimper.

With a stubborn expression she goes into the kitchen, comes back with a half-pill crushed in a spoonful of mousse, and I swallow it impatiently, wash it down with water, lie back relieved. The waves are still swelling up, but the knowledge that respite is at hand is soothing.

Hospice, ask Michal? Vicky is at my side again, holding the
telephone receiver, shaped like a question mark

Responsible Vicky, serious Vicky. How did the Bedrock succeed in finding her? He was always wrong about people, gave them credit which later blew up in his face, and the one who extinguished the flames was me. And now, when I won’t be here to benefit, he is beginning to blossom.

Michal!? Vicky insists, pointing with the telephone.

All right, I yield.

She calls the home hospice, her eyes on the dial with supreme concentration her hesitant finger dialing, and when she hears the ringing tone. she hands me the receiver, holding it between my mouth and my ear.

Michal, please.
Michal is on a home visit. This is Noa.
It’s Dana.
Hi, Dana, good to hear from you, the voice grows warmer.
Things aren’t so good.
What’s wrong?
Fierce pains. An hour before it’s time.
What are you doing about it?
I took a pill.
Great, says the voice called Noa, and the system is familiar. Everything’s fine, she’ll say. If you take a pill, that’s great. If you don’t take a pill, that’s great. Whatever you do is great.
Do you feel better now?
Yes, a little.
Wonderful. We may need to reschedule the medication. Just a moment, I see that you’re on tomorrow’s list. Tomorrow is visiting day, isn’t it?

Perhaps, I reply, lost, not remembering the order of hours and days.

Is the Filipina there?
Yes.
Put her on, please.

How are you, I hear the calm voice as I gesture to Vicky to take the phone.

Yes?

She concentrates, says OK, OK, OK, each time on a different note, and finally puts down the phone, smiles in satisfaction and goes into the kitchen to return the pills to the drawer, the rest of the mousse to the refrigerator and to rinse the spoon.

In the other room, amidst the fumes of paint thinner, there is a double bed with a red corduroy cover. Yehoyada folds the cover back and sits down and I sit too. He comes closer, thighs touching and looks into my eyes: Are you comfortable?

The thin lips, the childish expression, the green-grey specks in his eyes. I try to focus on his face, to flee the tempest, the apprehension, the conflicting arguments that are splitting my brain. Get out, someone yells at me, get out of here, quick. He undoes the buttons on my shirt, with the familiar slowness, a button then a caress, another button and a kiss, and when the shirt is lying on the chair beside the bed, he gropes along my back, undoing the clasp on the brassiere, while I sit still, my arms at my sides. He lets me go and leans back: If I were only a painter! he says, and my breasts are quivering, begging, touch me, touch me, and he gets up, removes his jacket slowly, puts it on the chair and turns to me: I'm going out to make sure that everything is locked. Get undressed and get under the covers, so you won't catch cold.

A mechanical doll, still wearing socks and panties, slithers under the blanket. The jeans chosen immediately after the new cotton underpants are narrow and uncomfortable. A siren lies under a blanket, thighs clenched tightly together.

Yehoyada comes in with an approving expression. What does he see? What can he see? A curly, young head, thin, naked shoulders. Satisfied, he removes his shirt. What is lighter, his skin
or his undershirt?

_Here’s something you should learn!_ he says and drapes the shirt over the door handle: _I cover the keyhole so that nobody can peep in._

_Is someone likely to come?_ I curl up in horror.

_No, not at all, but you must learn to be prepared always for the unexpected._

He removes his pants, holds them by the edges, folds them according to rule, seam to seam, and puts them on the chair, as smooth as if he’s just ironed them. In shorts and undershirt, body thin and chest hair mostly white, he slips rapidly under the covers and shrinks back, surprised at encountering unexpected coarse denim instead of milk-and-honey skin.

An old, battle-wise war horse. His hands return to my breasts, cupping them from below, reminding them of his delicate, hard touch, and then they creep down to the belly. His mouth is against my ear:

_Dana, take them off._

_Is that the magic sentence I was awaiting?_ Sitting up, back towards him, I free myself of the siren’s garments. A liberated little mermaid bursts into the ocean, dives headlong into the water. _Come in_, I hear him say, impatience in his voice. _Come to me._

Dr. Yuval Carmi was supposed to wait for me in his office in the ENT Department. However, apart from two medical journals lying open on his desk, there was nothing to indicate his presence.

_Your father will be OK_, he reassured me several hours previously as he left the ER. _He'll probably be in Ward B, Internal Medicine. I think he's had a mild CVA. Come by my room whenever you can, OK? We'll catch up on things._

Nocturnal silence in the ward, and the nurse who hastens towards me, hostile, directs me to his room:

_Are you sure he's here? He's on call, and physicians on call are_
usually at home.

And amidst the inner turmoil, the warring concentric circles, the stone at the center is my father, around him the routine everyday duties, Then there is the Bedrock and finally me.: Idiot, I tell myself, of course he’ll be waiting for you in his room, but not late at night. Dr. Carmi is no longer Yuvush who tugs his underpants out of the cleft in his behind. He has a wife now, children, and family. But just then the ward door opens, and in the dim light spilling out of the nurses’ office, the shadow of the newcomer lengthens then shortens, and white-coated Yuval is standing there: I went up to see your father. He’s sleeping like a baby. I thought you’d gone home.

Am I supposed to have fond memories of every boy I knew in the ninth or tenth grade?

Bringing two cups of coffee from the tiny kitchen in the staff room, he sits down facing me, and we gaze at one another.

You haven’t changed, he says. Too tired to select my words, I reply: Oh, come on, really. I’m not fifteen any more. And Dr. Carmi, discomfited, agrees: Of course, of course. I meant that you look young. Then we both calculate our age and the time that’s passed, and I say, we’ll never be young again, and he says, the main thing is to keep your health.

What a way to talk, I say, recovering. What is this, a geriatric reunion?

It’s nighttime, he laughs but his eyes are tired. I’m vulnerable at night. The word ‘vulnerable’” does something to me that dozens of compliments could not have achieved.

I’m married, finished my residency, one kid, second on the way, he answers my questions, not necessarily in that order.

I’m married, given up on my Ph.D.

In what field?

Although I may have guessed even then that I was unlikely to
go back there, I adhere to the facts: *History of the Yishuv, but I don’t feel like talking about it.*

*I understand,* he says, leaning back in his chair, with a gloomy and serious expression, eyes apparently set on other sights. *Children?*

*I don’t want to talk about that, either.*

*Full of secrets,* he says quietly, *as mysterious as always,* and smiles: *Dana, there’s a question that’s been bothering me for years. Why didn’t you answer my letter?*

*Letter?* I try to recall.

*You know, after the tenth grade.*

*The tenth grade?*

*I sent a letter.*

*No,* I decide to play the innocent. *I never received anything.*

What does his expression indicate: relief or skepticism? *What was in it?*

*Nothing serious,* he shrugs.

After ten years of good-bad, bad-good marriage, well-skilled in pretense, I can feel my senses sharpening. Perhaps this is the awaited rescue from the desolation of everyday life.

Abba’s condition worsens: he has a tube up his nose, an IV in his left arm; his right cheek is distorted into the semblance of a smile. During daily morning and evening visits, I read the text on the saline drip bag, wipe his face with a damp tissue, check that the catheter bag is filling regularly with dark urine, converse with the nurses.

After learning their names, the names of their children or boyfriends I chat with them: how are you, how are things, what did the teacher say at the parent-teacher conference and how did you enjoy yesterday’s movie? Eventually they start greeting me with a wide smile in the morning, allow me to sit beside him till late at night.

But when his system begins to collapse, and my request to
transfer him to intensive care is rejected, because there’s no free bed there, the deputy head physician sends me off to calm down. A fierce struggle commences where one party is adamant and the other loses control. Grabbing my shoulder, Yuval leads me down to the cafeteria. *Don’t conduct lost battles,* he says. *The man is over eighty. Come on, really, what do you want. Let him go.*

I’m not going to remember Abba now, not now and not later. Sometimes, at night, awoken not by pain or bladder pressure, lying on my rubber mattress, rising and falling to the pace of the machine as it pumps air, I think how fortunate I am. My own home, my own bed, my own perfumes.

And perhaps this too is a falsehood, one of many between me and myself. I take the facts and savor them slowly. Sometimes they are good, sometimes tolerable, sometimes terrible, measured by pain, measured by loss, never by their own essence, which is immeasurable.

And at night, rising and falling on the swell of memories, finding respite in moments of lovemaking before it turned into sex, longing for an innocent touch devoid of calculations or acceptance, just the pure search for what lies beyond, I know that sooner or later the pictures will blend together into a single entity without beginning or end, just a wheel turning in on itself, and what was is what will be.

Yehoyada is lying beside me in a strange apartment, the home of his friends. Dana is lying beside Yehoyada under a blanket in the home of strangers. The blanket is soft; the pillows are large. This is her second time in a wide bed with large pillows, and on both occasions her body has transmitted sensations unfamiliar to her brain. Yehoyada is breathing heavily, one hand propping his head, the other hand between her thighs. He probes, and she thinks to herself, maybe he’ll find treasure.
That’s Dana above the bed mocking Dana under the blanket. You’ve never been with a man? She hears his voice between the gasps.

No.

Do you want to tell me, he says, that no boy has ever tried to be with you that that what boys are worth today that they don’t try to feel up beauties like you? The words hang in the air, crude and disruptive.

Because I don’t let them, Dana replies, contradicting herself. Nobody ever put his fingers here? He goes on, his thumb caressing my pubic hair, his four fingers at the opening between the narrow, clenched thighs.

And here?
And here?
And here?

Each finger seeks out a different place and Dana is dumb, until she feels one of them moving in and separating the inner lips and circling in blind drunken circles.

No!
Yes, Dana, yes!
No!
Let me, it’s time.

And he raises his head from his hand and climbs onto her body, which lies beneath him hot and trembling, his knee separates her thighs, he sinks between them and she feels something, larger than a finger and more flexible, smooth and warm, burrowing between her thighs, homing.

Let me in, Dana.

How? She wants to shout, I don’t know how.

Let me, my love, my beauty.

He presses his pelvis against her, and presses again. The center of her body senses each twitch of a muscle, each move of a hair. A blind, hungry one-eyed head is seeking her out and will find her.
That’s the way of the world.

*Am I in?* he asks. *Put your legs on my back.* And she does.

*That’s it,* he says. *Dana, that’s it.*

Back and forth, back and forth, the Professor rocks his hips and his entire body, and I rock with him, feeling dampness and heat, and he kneads my breast with one hand, kisses my neck, my mouth. A hard and flexible tongue flicks hastily against an ear; I am attentive and surprised. No pain, no blood, just pleasant tension, terrible hunger for his touch, the sound of his voice.

*Oh, I say,* in order to console myself. *I must be in love with you.*

The first time.

The further it recedes into the distance, the more versions there are. Did it or did it not happen, did he say it or not. Did he touch or did I. Intentions generate actions, regrets miscarry the fetuses of events. Yearning creates a richness that no reality can contain.

When he jumps out of bed abruptly and hurries to the bathroom, I examine the sheet, searching in vain for signs.

*Your eyes are shining,* says Yehoyada, all smiles as he returns and climbs into his underwear, his organ slack, resting on his large balls. And when his pants are zipped up and his shirt is smoothly in place, the gold cufflinks peeping out of the sleeves, he turns towards me, as I struggle with my jeans, waits till I am fully dressed and then grasps my shoulders and leads me to the mirror in the entrance hall.

A girl with disheveled hair and glowing eyes looks back from the mirror, questioning.

*You see,* he says; *look at that expression, like a cat that’s licked the cream.*

Turning me, he squeezes me to his chest, kisses my forehead, eyes, lips. I open my mouth, allowing his tongue in, and he slides it over my tongue and then pulls away: *Oh, Dana, I want you*
again now but they might arrive. He hands back the forgotten sheet of paper, escorts me to the door, out into the late morning, sleepwalking, every cell on fire, every nerve singing. I’ve done it; I’ve done it, though without knowing exactly what and how I found myself in the street so quickly.

That evening there was a telephone call.

*Dana, it’s for you,* says Imma, not before asking: *Who wants to speak to her?*

*It’s the librarian,* she says, handing me the phone.

*You forgot to take the book.* I recognize Yehoyada’s voice.

...

*Can someone overhear?*

*No,* I gulp, my speech restored.

*How are you?*

*Everything’s fine.*

*Really?*

*Yes.*

*Miss me?*

*Yes, very much.*

Silence on the other side and then: *Good night, my love.*

Legs shaking. I replace the telephone and run to my room, dissolving. If there is love in this world, then this is love.

In the morning, my lips are still swollen though the mirror betrays nothing. My body is activated by a different mechanism. Hidden springs animate sinews which have only just come into operation. For years they grew in a hidden hothouse, but now, because of the touch of flesh on flesh, they’ve shed their outer skin. When the door of the apartment closes, and an early autumn Israeli morning surrounds me, mild and humid, with a westerly wind which has not yet decided if it is carrying a hint of cold, I smell the muffled odor of the sea and of cut grass – and I want to sing. I’ve done it!
Yesterday I tried to call Dorit but she wasn’t home. I can’t concentrate on homework although it’s the last year of high school and your future depends on that diploma, says my mother, trying to spur me on to a last effort before the finish line. But, when I’m facing my notebook, the pictures surface again, every detail is analyzed and every word reverberates. Our meeting is reenacted minute by minute with greater intensity, the shade of a smile, the timbre of a voice, the movement of a finger, a darting glance. Where do I fit in among all these? My actions are swallowed up in the amorphous rush of new emotion: more, more, more.

At least you’ll have an A+ for the Nili project, I tell myself, silencing the voice whose force is weakening from hour to hour. Not a single twelfth grader in the whole country will submit a better project, It’ll be detailed and sound. Collecting the pages already prepared, I take them to bed with me, trying to see them through his eyes. My handwriting is childish, too rounded, and the solution comes to me suddenly: I need to change my pen. A black pen will make the letters look more mature.

Huddled under the covers, in the teenager’s bed which has only just begun to seem narrow, I hug my body with both arms. My breasts are crushed, my knees bent in fetal position. Yakir, I try to savor his name, Yakir, but the sound is artificial and I revert to ‘Yehoyada’ as I will return in years to come, when he appears as if of his own accord, gradually fading from my memory. Oh God, only You know why this deep, harsh, lengthy and wonderful love happened to me.

I didn’t always think it so wonderful. Not at once, certainly not when I was with the Mother’s Dream and even afterwards, when it vanished without trace, forgotten and reviled, in the good-bad years of blessed routine, I did not return there. Why is it that now, in the final reckoning, in the seeming refuge from pain, my escape from today’s sensations to those of the past, he casts so long a
What gave me the strength to extract pleasure from pain, consolation from guilt? What prompted that game of a world within the world, a life within life? Where did it come from, the convoluted skill at acting out the diverse faces of reality - high school student, daughter, friend, lover, mistress, soldier, student, beloved - without shouting it from the rooftops, without disintegrating?

Swearing to stop and yet continuing, checking his address and planning to invade his tranquil everyday life, to get to know his wife, make friends with his children, his grandchildren, his neighbors, and in the end doing nothing. Just thinking, imagining, surmising.

Deep, harsh, wonderful – and disturbed.
Chapter 7: The Cow and the Calf

_That creep_, says Dorit, returning from a meeting with him, agitated. _I don’t understand you. What do you see in him?_

I gaze at her helplessly. 
_I told you he’d make a pass at anyone._

_But we’re in love._

_Bullshit._

_What happened? I’m afraid to ask._

_He grilled me about you, asked if you date boys._

_So you see, what do you want,_ I say, breathing a sigh of relief. _It’s jealousy, a sign that he loves me._

_You idiot, he tried to make a pass at me._

The stab of pain is intolerable. _May I give you a kiss?_ She continues, imitating his voice. 

_Where?_ 
_At the door, as I was leaving._

_No, kiss you where._

_How do I know? I said no._

And in the subsequent quiet I felt like a cast-off rag. 

_That’s his way of saying hello and goodbye to women, you know,_ I say, trying to pick up the pieces. _He’s from the old generation._

_Bullshit,_ says Dorit again, most untypically. _I’m telling you, Dana, you just don’t want to face the truth. Perhaps he loves you but he tries it on with everyone._

We were in the army by then. Dorit was closely attached to the young officer who would become her husband, and I was still taking off from my base on off-duty nights en route to hasty encounters half a flight up from the fourth floor after the light on the balcony was switched off. 

_So how do you explain the letters, the money and the presents I keep refusing to accept, the telephone calls?_
I told you, Dorit repeats with certainty, with the directness, which has fuelled our friendship for so many years, maybe he loves you but he's a randy old man.

The writing is on the wall: a randy old man. As if I didn't know it for myself, as if he wouldn't have loved any girl who allowed him to.

But on that morning, the morning after the first time, I soar on wings, float to school. The great scholar, Professor Yehoyada, has singled me out. I can’t wait, must see Dorit. Locating her in the schoolyard standing in a group, I flash her a message that something weighty has happened. We slip out through the side gate and hurry to a nearby apartment building, “our house”. Round the back of the building is a neat, hidden bicycle-storage corner enlivened by a potted philodendron. We sit down on the second step, and Dorit waits with questioning eyes.

I tried to contact you all yesterday evening.
We went to visit my aunt, have you forgotten?
Ah, I….
When you didn't turn up in class today, I realized that you'd decided to go. I thought……

Did anyone ask where I was?
Who, teachers? No way, they didn’t check the register. Did you go to Zikhron?

No, have you forgotten. Hanevi’im Street.
How many apartments does he have? Is he rich?
It belongs to his friend, an artist.
Wow, what's his name?

I don’t know, can’t remember. I’ve suppressed all the practical details. How can that be, how can I have forgotten?

No big deal, she says. What difference does it make? Have you noticed that you haven’t told me anything yet?

I tell her in detail about the embrace when I came in, the bed
with the corduroy cover, the words of love, the nocturnal telephone call.

Dorit listens wide-eyed, together we undergo the experience, revive the past that becomes the here and now as we speak.

*But have you noticed,* she says again, *that you haven’t told me the main thing?*

Returning to the kernel, to my first time, which will remain my first time even after the second time, and even more so after the third and the fourth, rendered more vivid by those that follow, overshadowing them, I try to describe it although the words evade me.

*Did it hurt?*

*No,* I say, as surprised as Dorit.

*Did you bleed?*

*No,* I say, surprised again.

*Perhaps penetration didn’t take place,* she says, echoing the terminology of our sex education lessons.

*It did. I felt it, he put it in and took it out, I felt it, but just pressure, no pain.*

*Strange,* says Dorit. *Perhaps it’s very small.*

I’m offended. *When did you become such an expert,* I flash at her, *or perhaps you’re not telling me everything?*

Dorit laughs, and her short hair bounces. *My sister told me, what do you think. In precise detail. You must be lucky.* She decides to be magnanimous. *He must have prepared you well.*

*Yes. After all, he’s very experienced.*

That’s what I’ll repeat to her, eighteen months later, sending her to meet him.

*He already knows you so well from my stories. It’s time you met.*

The words aren’t mine.

*Don’t you think it’s time I got to know your Dorit?* he says to me. *I’ve been hearing stories about her for the last year and a half.*
I don’t know, she’s busy.
Bring her with you some time. Not here, he adds, responding to the refusal in my eyes. We’ll have coffee in the university cafeteria. Nobody will know.
She probably won’t want to. She spends her spare time with Itzik. Let her bring him along, why not. I want to know all the people around you. Don’t you think that’s only natural?

Tormented by thoughts of his wife, his children, his daily schedule about which I know nothing, I give in, dissolve, and flattered.

However, it turns out that Dorit does want to come and without Itzik. Just the two of us, she says, why not?
Get to know him; tell me what you think, see if he really loves me. Are you still having doubts? she asks. You’ve been together for so long. Don’t you think that’s enough?
Nevertheless, I insist.
I am not confident

Was it then that I established the pattern of close-remote, sincere-sham relations, each time touching and fleeing, yielding and vanishing, loving and denying?

My soul sends out long, yielding tendrils, insinuates itself into a denied love, which fits it like a glove. Nothing can ever be simple, natural, and acceptable; everything must ramify, contradict itself, and grow wild.

Do you love me, at my advanced age, Yehoyada asked, with my decrepit body?
Will you want to stay with me when I’m limping, leaning on a stick, shaking? What do you see in me, an old man of sixty-three?
My little Dana, one swallow doesn’t turn winter back into spring. We have already adopted a routine, twice a week, but when the
heart aches we schedule another meeting, and in between there are letters, long telephone conversations.  
How did I succeed in my quiet, non-demanding way, in binding him? How did my young body, which was beginning to twist, to respond, achieve what words cannot achieve?  
One afternoon, as I lie on the carpet reading haikus while he leans on his desk, having finished a telephone conversation, his mellifluous voice reaches me, encompasses me: Dana.  
I raise my head.  
I love you.  

Dr. Yuval Carmi said: I loved you.  
The Mother’s Dream said “Love ya!” in his jumpy, distant way. Only the Bedrock was tongue-tied. What’s love? he said when he proposed to me. If wanting to be together is love, then I love you. And he was the only one I married.  

We decided in the end to meet him in the Maneh Street office, and not in the university cafeteria.  
I want you to see the place, so that you’ll know exactly what everything looks like, then perhaps you’ll understand him better, I say to Dorit, unconsciously using the same words he used before my trip to Zikhron.  
The day before our threefold meeting, I develop a fever. A tickle in the throat the evening before turns into white blisters on swollen tonsils. Unable to eat or swallow, voice hoarse, and the thermometer spikes to 39 degrees.  
Dorit telephones, despairing.  
You were going to a movie? Asks Imma. So what’s the tragedy? Can’t you postpone it?  
Perhaps I should go all the same, I croak.  
Certainly not! She is shocked. Go out with a fever? Do you want pneumonia?
Dorit, I whisper into the phone, go by yourself.
No way, she shouts.
Tell him I'm sick so he won't expect me.
I'm not going on my own.
Go for my sake.
What will I talk to him about?
Trust him. He has so much experience.

Did Ora Efrat send me to her elderly de Valmont?
Am I now sending Dorit? Unintentionally fulfilling the wet
dreams of an aging man?

What does an elderly man think about? Are his thoughts
different from those of a boy, a young man, a middle-aged man?

Once I used to wonder how a man feels when he penetrates.
Men probably wonder what women experience. Wanting to know
what the other feels, squaring the circle, living on the rings of
Saturn-

Yehoyada didn’t lurk in wait for Dorit behind the door, but he
served her coffee and sat her beside him on the couch.

He buttered me up, Dorit delivers a restrained report or is she
perhaps exaggerating, dramatizing.

He asked me if my hair color is natural, said my eyes speak poetry.
How can you stand it? she asks.

But I, stray lamb that I am, tell myself that it’s different with
me, different with me.

We talked about you. He said that you’re the apple of his eye.

Apple?

Apple of his eye, that you’re as precious to him as his soul. Those
were his words.

You see, he loves me and he wasn’t ashamed to say it. You are the
first person apart from us who knows about us, and he wasn’t afraid-

That's all very well. He knows that I won't do anything to harm
you, but how can you tolerate a type like that?
He liberated me sexually, I tell her with profound seriousness. He freed me from revulsion.

She gazes at me with her light, poetic eyes: Perhaps, she drawls, pensive. He must have a great deal of experience.

The threefold meeting never took place. Meeting him after my protracted convalescence, I cling to him in a lengthy embrace, breathing in his smell, his body fitted to mine, my head at the opening of his shirt.

Better now? he whispers into my hair.

Yes, completely.

Really?

Why?

Because I wondered why you didn't want to come with Dorit.

It's not true that I didn't want to come. I had a high fever.

I'm not saying you didn't, he continues as we move to the couch, as usual, and I curl up on his lap, his arms shielding me, his mouth at my ear:

I'm sure you were sick, but why just before our meeting? Did you want her to come alone, to test me, to test her?

On the contrary, I protest. You know I have a tendency to tonsillitis. The echo of my mother's voice.

The body does what the soul wants. His lips brush my ear. You haven't convinced me.

He removes my shirt, frees my breasts from the brassiere, and when the ringing telephone draws him to his desk leaving me half-naked, he gestures to me to come closer, seats me on his lap, one hand on the telephone, the other on me. I stroke his arm between elbow and shoulder, caress his armpit and return to the soft inner skin of the elbow.

He puckers his lips, his mischievous expression urging me to continue and my fingers slip under his shirt and stroke his nipples. Unconsciously, our hands move in tandem, his on my exposed
skin, mine on his chest. Still on the phone, he abandons my breasts and picks up my other hand which is passive. Is it waiting? He places it on the front of his pants, and with understanding born of experience, I undo the zipper, and, from the opening of his boxer shorts - why is he allowed white cotton while I must wear lace? – I draw out his cock, which responds with enthusiasm to my touch, liberated thankfully, exposed to air and light, innocent and delicate and soft.

He takes a deep, eager breath, gestures to me with his eyes to continue and I stroke the one-eyed head which demands more, more, move down to its root, and as Yehoyada tenses his legs, I caress his thigh, free the hand under his shirt, and employ both hands, one circling the crown and the other flitting down the length with lingering light touches, sensing the increasing hardness, soft and vulnerable. He ends his conversation and gives a sigh of pleasure, both hands clutching my breasts.

_Ah, Dana, you are wonderful._

A second later he traps my right hand: _Not like that. I'll teach you._

Teacher and student, which is the cow and which the calf? Because after stepping up my pace, and showing me the correct direction, down from the top, squeezing gradually, crown then length then root, he stiffens backward, surrendering to my touch and, sliding between his knees to the floor, I focus on the movements like the steps of a new dance: stroke, squeeze, down, stroke, squeeze, down, stroke, squeeze.

_Does this make you feel good?_ he asks me, a croak in his voice.

_Is it good for you?_

_Very good, but I want you to feel good as well._

He straightens up, props me against his desk, pulls off what is left of my clothes with violent movements, and as he tries to enter me, he groans in confirmation: _Ah, you're wet_, as if he has won a prize.
Guiding his cock with a hand, he mumbles: Where's my home, give me my home. And I, better than any man’s dream, adapt myself to him, open wide the gate.

Ab, he says, ab.

Teacher and student. Which is the cow, which the calf?
Eyes closed, he crouches over me, moving in and out with a regular rhythm. Eyes half-closed, I sneak looks at him, at his lined skin, his flaring nostrils, his distorted mouth. Now too, lying here, I see it in my mind’s eye, that expression of total concentration, of surrender, all mine.

It’s me, I think; I am the one doing this to him.
Tremulous with power, I respond to his movements; submerged into the monotonous rocking, absorb his mumblings, like an earth mother gathering up a lost child, dying of love.

The Mother’s Dream came into my life just when I needed him. I was walking from the Humanities Building to University Street down the broad steps surrounded by manicured lawns. Straight ahead in the distance lay the Mediterranean, licking at the shores of foreign countries, and I was groping in my purse for my wallet.

Need any help? Says a cute guy at my side.
I’m trying to find money for the bus, I blurt.
You sounded so sincere, he said later, that I decided I must get to know you.
I’m lucky, he says. I have a scooter.
Good for you! I look him over - tall, dark hair and eyes - and continue in a more pleasant tone. (What was it about him? The short straight nose, the lean body?). How fortunate not to be dependent on public transport.
You talk like a law student, he says.
And I burst out laughing. Not at all, History of the Yishuv, that’s
my subject.

Let me introduce myself, then, he says, holding out his left hand. Uri Koren, 2\textsuperscript{nd} year law and economics.

Nice to meet you. I’m Dana.

And my right hand collides with his and we both change over to the left at the same moment and as our hands find one another and shake, we have already brushed against one another unintentionally, and the deliberately strong, formal handshake means that we are acquainted.

I don’t want you to think that I always chat up girls on the steps, he says as we walk on, and I change direction, as if naturally, and follow him to the parking lot. But you looked so lost that I thought you’d mislaid something.

My purse is a mess, I smile. I can’t find a thing, not even my wallet.

I could give you a ride. Where do you want to go?

No, thanks, I say with a smile. I don’t ride with strangers.

And so, like in the fairy tales, I met the lawyer that every Jewish mother wants for her daughter. An ex-scout leader, former paratrooper, with parents living in a prosperous suburb, Ramat Chen, sister in the army, good family, father a physician, mother nursing for him, he tells me next day in the semi-cynical style I will get to know well.

I met a really charming guy, I tell my parents that evening. He’s studying law and economics, he’s really tall.

And? asks, Imma.

Nu? Abba looks at me.

We’re meeting tomorrow after his last class. Both our classes end at seven forty five. We’ll go to a movie.

Do you know anything about him? Imma asks.

Isn’t it a better idea for him to pick you up from home the first time? Abba joins in.
Oh, come on, I say. I didn’t have to tell you.

I really need someone like him. Uri gallops into my life like a knight to the rescue. Like a knight on a white steed, says Dorit. It was worth waiting for him.

Newlywed, Dorit observes my protracted spinsterhood with mild concern.

How long are you going to keep your Yehoyada? she asks me on her wedding evening. It’s time to put a stop, finito. Find someone else.

I know. I know. It just hasn’t happened.

It always happens if you want to find it. It depends on you.

It takes no effort to find Uri, he’s six foot two. Can I still remember his features? Nice smile, straight teeth, and above all that body, muscular, slim, limber.

I used to play basketball, but the army ended all that.

Luckily that’s all it ended.

He likes to go running in the early morning and to pick me up and spin me around like a toddler. Admires my breasts and waits two months before touching me for the first time.

Twenty-one years have gone by since then, and if he were to pass me by in the street today, I wouldn’t recognize him. Once I looked him up in the yellow pages, Uri Koren, attorney at law, but didn’t find him. Did he achieve his dream of working in a large office as a notary and specializing in company law, not criminal law. His head on my belly, dreaming: Not damages, not matrimonial problems, none of that shit of ‘he said and I said.’ Economics, finance, that where you find the big money.

I stroke his forehead, to the roots of his hair, see a house in the suburbs, three children and a dog and want to flee.

I met every mother’s dream, I tell Yehoyada after keeping the secret from him for two weeks.

Who is he? he asks, alert.
He’s studying law and economics. Bourgeois aspirations, he laughs. Is that all you have to say about him?

He’s OK, I say modestly. Tall, charming.
Is he a good man? Does he look after you?
Wait, it’s just the beginning, I laugh.
Have you slept together? The familiar spark lights his eyes.
I told you, we’ve just started.
Don’t give in too easily if you want to catch him, says the great Yehoyada.

Interesting! Four years ago you talked differently.
There’s no comparison, he laughs. Now I’m worried about you.

A lusterless evening descends. It begins with the change in the street sounds. There are fewer cars, the horns are louder, and rapid flickers on the walls and ceiling disappear instantly when the light is switched on. It is my hour of play-acting: ‘Everything’s fine’. ‘How are you?’ ‘Nothing new’.

I’m half-sitting, half-lying in the leather lounger to which I was moved during the afternoon, a bottle of mineral water on the little table beside me. On my other side, Vicky is feeding me from a dish of chocolate mousse while she watches an Argentinian soap opera.

Once I loved sweet food but now sweetness arouses a combination of sourness and revulsion, generating queasiness. An expert now, a wizard of nausea, I amused myself one morning by cataloging the ultimate nauseas in order to hang a list, written in cursive script on parchment scroll, ion the wall of the Oncology Department,. The Scroll of Independence of the common nauseated individual. The greenish juices of morning nausea, burning noontime nausea with its content of a spoonful of yoghurt and a trace of boiled vegetables, and in between the lengthy or brief bouts, those caught just in time and those that arrive suddenly like thieves in the night and rob you of the desire to live. And as I
pondered them one day, classifying them, the fiercest of all began
to rise up like a fountain, swell into a flood, propelling the contents
of my stomach into my throat with each spasm of the lower belly.
All my involuntary internal muscles were brought into play by
emergency order – and then, at the very last moment, by supreme
effort, I diverted my thoughts to Hanevi’im Street, to Yehoyada,
to the first time, and everything was suspended. Body and soul, as
Yehoyada once said to me, body and soul.

And that, apparently, was why I decided to relive my loves,
to go back to the men of my life in flashes of memory, to what
happened, what should have happened, and what I wanted to
happen. A counter-balance to the cells growing inside me, the tiny
creatures spawning other tiny creatures in geometrical procession,
feeding and living at my expense.

Body and soul, said Yehoyada, and young as I was, I knew he
was right. Always right.

I have a request, he says when we have been having sex for
several weeks. Go and see a gynecologist.

The shirt on the handle of the bedroom door in Hanevi’im
Street is as dazzling white as ever, even without cufflinks. The smell
of turpentine tickles my nose.

She’s a nice woman. We’re good friends. Go and see her.

What for?
I want to know if you’re no longer a virgin.

I’m not going to any gynecologist, I say. It would be humiliating.

Why not, Dana? he says, wielding his tone of voice, playing on
our intimacy. She’s a woman, a nice woman, I promise.

But what difference does that make? I say, confused. We make
love, don’t we?

It makes a difference to me, he says, coaxing me and his eyes
avoiding mine, and only four years later, when I first sleep with
Uri, will I understand why he was evasive.
Go and see her, I beg you, he repeats the following week.
Why don’t you go? he asks a week later.
So that’s it then, you’re not going? he sums up finally.

Watching Vicky, who is enthralled by the TV screen where a girl is gazing at her lover with wide-open, melancholy tear-filled eyes, while her mouth utters lies, I know that beauty is not vain, truth is not deceitful. The snake tempted me, said Eve. And even if she attributed her desire to an outside element, she was still telling the truth.

And what about me?
Have you really never been with a man? Yehoyada asks, while I am lying in his arms, silent and protesting, inert and ardent, responding to each and every whim.
Am I the first? he asks hoarsely, his finger trying to force its way in. Do you feel anything?
Were you a virgin? Are you sure? he repeats, trying to penetrate, and I am offended, silent, tensed.

A man of sixty, a randy old man, wins Avishag the Shunamite. A honeycomb falls into his possession, the honey runs down his chin and he finds it hard to swallow.

Are you sure, he asks. Why don’t you go to a woman doctor who can examine you.
What’s there to examine now that we’ve slept together? I ask matter-of-factly.
She’s a nice woman. Do it.

Dana nama. Dana lo kama. Dana is hurt, Dana is surprised. What’s wrong with Dana? Almost eighteen, never been with a man, always said no, no, no!. And now the gift is lost.

What does he mean? Dana asks Dorit.
Maybe he also looked for stains and didn’t find them, Dorit surmises.
But how could he not believe me?

Call it whatever you like, says Yoram during the long, sleepless nights after the abortive birth. A married couple: unhappy, alone, and side-by-side in the marital bed. Love, he says dismissively, what does an eighteen-year-old girl understand about love, she just thinks she understands. Sexual exploitation is too delicate a description of what took place between you. The way he treated you was rape. Simply rape. Straight from the hip.

It all reminds me of a Picasso etching, he goes on. A lustful monster of a satyr, screwing an innocent girl, or preparing to screw her. I’ll bring you the picture to show you.

Stop it, I say, shocked, overflowing with self-pity.

Rape, Yoram repeats, picking on a young girl. If I’d only known when he was still alive.

He loved me, I say in defense, pitying myself, him, Yehoyada. Rape isn’t only physical force, he says, rape is… Why not seduction, I interrupt him. Because he exploited you.

Not true. You aren’t capable of understanding. I wanted it too.

He didn’t use force so you justify him. It’s more convenient for you to say: ‘I loved him’ than to face the facts.

But it was love, I insist.

All right, he sighs, we’ll compromise, let it be seduction. But there was definitely no love involved.
Chapter 8: Choosing Lingerie

Nettles sprout from every crack in the sidewalk, asters compete with glowing cornflowers, but in Maneh Street nothing changes: until the light goes out, I can’t go up. Passing the flower barrow on Chen Boulevard corner of Hanevi’im, I buy one long-stemmed rose.

For a month now I have had money of my own, earned honestly at an hourly rate. Professor Yakir Yehoyada is writing the book he has wanted to produce for some time, having just found the time and the funding. Pacing up and down his small office, he dictates and I type. There are piles of books on his desk and newspaper clippings, and he walks to the door and back, seven meters in all, creating a world. The typewriter stands on the tea table, which is covered in green felt and I sit on the couch, typing at his dictation pace.

The Gideonim organization was established by Alexander in 1913 colon the young people of Zikhron Yaakov joined in enthusiastically and began to restore their close surroundings on a volunteer basis period they shared the responsibility for guard duties in order to prevent theft by the local Arabs period open quotes only force can withstand force close quotes was the prevailing approach period, just as the biblical Gideon…. Just a minute, I haven’t caught up.

…Chose well and established a small Jewish force comma brave and resourceful comma it was they that the Gideonites were intended to resemble period. The idea caught on and roused the enthusiasm of the local youth to the point where the founders toyed with another idea comma, establishment of single quote the Samsonites close single quote, in other words comma, consolidation of a younger generation comma, for volunteer work.

I type slowly and Yehoyada dictates at the same speed, pauses
when necessary.

It's all a question of budget, he explains, his eyes bright with enthusiasm.

You're a soldier, right? The 805 brigade, isn't that what you call it? – in the office at eight, out at five, doing zero work in between - so you have no problems with free evenings if you're not on duty?

True, I say, waiting to hear more.

I have funding for my research, everything is falling into place, he crows. Now will you agree to take money from me without objections from your bourgeois conscience?

In return for what? I say, tensing. What for?

It depends, his eyes are half-closed. You'll either summarize material I need or check details, like an assistant. And suddenly he looks straight at me, with the familiar mischievous glance. The most convenient arrangement for both sides would be for you to work here and not in libraries. Can you type?

With two fingers.

Is that all?

Yes, I hesitate, but I'm quite fast.

Excellent. He is already humming to himself. I'll dictate to you.

Dictate?

The book. Why are you surprised? My book on Alexander. I like to dictate to my secretary or onto a tape. Is it agreed?

What?

You'll be paid by the hour.

A good pretext for meeting, I hope he can hear the mature, reasonably ironic, reasonably enlightened note in my voice.

And you'll finally be able to buy the things I've been asking you to buy all this time.

The lingerie department is located on the second floor of the new and first department store in Tel Aviv. The No. 1 bus, carrying
a load of weary women, shopping carts and thick-bellied men, lets me off at Herzl Street. You’re actually doing it! murmurs light-hearted, determined Dana. She finds her way to the escalator, another Tel Aviv first, stands on it gingerly for fear that her shoe will catch in the last step, leaps off onto safe ground and there, surrounding her on all sides, is a realm of lace and silk, red and black and blue and white and brown and green.

A salesclerk hurries over. Do you need assistance?

No, thank you.

My tranquil, self-assured voice does not betray the unease welling up inside.

On metal globe-shaped shelves lie dozens of panty sets in silk, nylon and lace, tricot and lycra. So many possibilities! How do others know how to choose?

There are sale reductions, says the sales clerk and retreats to the brassiere section, and she is almost certainly darting glances at me from there. Wine-red and mauve would be cute, pink is childish, brown is wishy-washy, and there’s also off-white. I am at a loss, flushed with excitement. It’s no big deal, buying panties but the sense of something sinful stirs deep inside me.

Red is too whorish, blue is the national color, green is revolting. All out of the question!

Bikini panties in deepest, hypnotic black, decorated with lacy flowers, flesh-colored thin nylon panties, with a pattern of transparent leaves, and two matching brassieres. The money changes hands. Clutching the shopping bag, I go out into the warm evening with a sigh of relief. The sin of the flesh is well concealed, small and delicate but strident. How will I explain my strange, unnecessary purchases when the weekly laundry day comes round at home?

Uri is a freelancer on an evening paper. Twice a week he reports to the news desk, once on his free day and once after classes;
he combines brief news agency items with news items sent by reporters. *Rewriting, merging, editing, call it whatever you like, you won't believe the mistakes they make,* he says. *I'm not making a lot of money, but I enjoy every minute.*

On Saturday evenings he works as a ticket-collector on the No. 4 bus. *Move inside, lady, take your change,* Uri mimics cheerfully as he describes his work. *Until a friend got me the job on the night news desk I was working on the buses three times a week, now I'm in transition,* he laughs.

He’s taking evening courses and spends his free mornings sleeping; in the vacations he gives private maths tuition.

I am filled with admiration.

*He'll make a wonderful husband,* I tell Yehoyada. *Diligent, clever, hard-working.*

*Why is he taking evening courses; isn't that strange?* he enquires. *So that he can work, that's why.*

*Or perhaps he likes sleeping? Have you thought about that?* He smirks as if he’s just stuck a pin in my balloon.

Poor Yehoyada.

We meet as a foursome: Dorit and Itzik, Uri and me.

*Do me a favor, says Uri. If you want to see her, do it in your spare time. If I have a free evening, I don’t want to waste it on them.*

Dorit and Itzik are preoccupied with buying an apartment. *Where can we get the best mortgage conditions? Do you know anything about the housing project for young couples? Does a bridging loan help? Is it better to buy something cheap in the suburbs or pay out a fortune for something more central, where it’s easier to find work?*

Itzik is working as a youth counselor while he takes matriculation exams again to improve his grades and he’ll study social work if he’s accepted,. Dorit is working with her mother in her private kindergarten in place of the helper who’s been fired, and is planning to study at a teachers’ college next year. Sitting with
them in Cafe Roval, Uri is jumpy, and I’m somnolent.

Well share a pastry, says Dorit.

Chocolate gateau for us, I join in.

What’s this, Uri jumps up, why are you ordering for me? I want apple strudel, heated, he tells the young waitress, giving her a measuring look.

Has Itzik passed the pastry test? I wonder, recalling how Dorit once planned to test her first boyfriend. I try to disregard my hurt feelings and to broadcast business as usual. You know, I say to Uri, Dorit used to have a stinginess test that she was planning to apply to her future husband. She said she was going to order three pastries and see how he reacted.

I ordered one pastry for the two of us, says Dorit, offended, because I don’t want to gain weight and Itzik doesn’t like pastries, in any case.

Itzik nods in confirmation. He nods at anything Dorit says. What a talent I have for complicating matters. Uri surveys the café walls, the chairs, shifts uneasily on his chair and says: There are scarcely any customers here and they should replace those old tablecloths. How much could it cost them? I’m telling you, they must be on the verge of bankruptcy.

Did you know, he says suddenly after a brief silence, that the official receiver gets his share of a bankrupt company before the other creditors?

Itzik looks into Dorit’s eyes. What does he read there? Gazing at Uri, I know exactly what to read, an SOS. . If these are your friends, then God knows who you are.

Leap-frogging between two worlds, telling Yehoyada about Uri and hiding Yehoyada from Uri. When Uri is studying, Yehoyada is free, and when Uri is free so am I.

Even when I’m studying – I’m always free.

The semester break begins tomorrow. Uri telephones from the
night desk. How about coming over to my place tomorrow morning? Fine.

I travel to Ramat Chen by bus. When I have a husband who’s a successful attorney, an official receiver who signs contracts and takes a percentage, I console myself to the rhythm of the turning wheels in my head, I’ll be able to drive a Chrysler. What started with a scooter could end in a Rolls Royce. Can I really see myself in a development for young couples in a god-forsaken suburb, barracks with shirts and vests and pants hung out to dry and flapping in the breeze, or envisage life in a little house in Ramat Chen, with two square meters of lawn.

This is Gefen Street, says the driver, and I clamber out hastily.

Uri’s house is not Uri. Is Uri himself really Uri?

Removing the door-key from under the welcome mat, according to his instructions, I enter a gloomy entrance hall where a large mirror reflects coats and hangers. On the right, the last door down the corridor, that’s what he said. Obedient and well-trained, I remember. Uri is sleeping. It’s ten thirty and he’s lying on his side, breathing peacefully, filling the length of his narrow bed. There is a window above him with a patterned curtain that hides the wall as well.

U-ri, I whisper.

He catches his breath, his eyes dart in panic behind his eyelids. U-ri, I’m here, stroking his forehead. Are you dreaming?

U-ri, I draw out the name, leaning over to kiss him just as he raises his head in alarm. My chin bangs sharply against his head, and I bite my lip.

What’s happened? What are you doing here? He stares at me, confused.

Where’s the bathroom? I wipe my bleeding lip. In the corridor. Which door? The one with the mannekin pis sign on the door.
Not the toilet, I need water.

Rinsing my mouth, I note how fast the cold water stems the bleeding, how slowly other sensations flow, foaming, close to the skin.

I’m always groggy in the morning, Uri apologizes as we sit at the kitchen table. I went to bed after three. I thought you’d come at twelve.

I surprised you.

I can think of more successful surprises. What would you like to drink?

Orange juice.

I’m having black coffee. Want some?

Sure.

A touch of cardamom?

Great.

I carry the glass of juice into his room, he brings the two small coffee cups and their bitter aroma fills the air, overcoming the sour, sweaty odors of sleep.

We’ve been a couple for two months and Uri hasn’t really touched me, hasn’t even kissed me or initiated any moves in that direction.

Nor have I.

How does it actually work? I ask Dorit. Is he supposed to ask me if I want to be his girl or what?

What do you mean? Dorit is preoccupied with buying a pair of slippers. Should she take the ones with the pink synthetic fur or the blue? I’ve come along to help her choose.

How will I know that I’m actually his official girlfriend if he’s never suggested it?

Why, is he seeing someone else?

Not that I know of. But he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t try anything.
How do I know, Dorit laughs. I’ve already forgotten what it’s like. Some of them ask and some don’t, some try immediately and others don’t.

I’m not in the know either (is there a touch of arrogance in my voice as I say that?). I missed out on the years when one acquires experience in those matters.

Listen to the old lady; Dorit starts to say, but halts in mid-sentence. The blue, she says to the sales-clerk, pays, waits for her receipt and as we go out into the street, she turns to me with a steady, serious gaze:

See how he behaves, how things develop.

He’ll be waiting for me after class, I say, glad to be giving her details of our routine. He takes me home and then he suggests where we’ll meet next time.

So why are you fussing, she sums up. It looks like this is it.

Hand in hand we descend the stairs in the Humanities Building on Sunday, when lessons end at eight. Hand in hand we go to the movies. When he sees me home late in the evening, he brushes a hand across my nape, lingers there and says: Good night.

One evening, on the back of his scooter, clinging to him, my breasts crushed against his back I try to imagine how he feels. Uri likes to keep silent when on the bike. It’s great to feel the wind, he says, and I can’t hear you.

I keep silent too, not always having something to say, and even if I do, not always sure I should say it.

I bring the rose to Yehoyada and, if I could afford them, I would buy dozens of them, erect, long-stemmed; thorns like tiny pyramids of pain, but their beauty is uncontestable. There is nobility in their velvet leaves, the delicate, slight curve of the flower soaring from its stem.

He opens the door wide and I am engulfed by him. The
smell of Yardley’s soap and moist Dunhill tobacco surrounds me. From one of his overseas trips, he brought me soap wrapped in rustling paper and said: *This is White Yardley, the smell you like so much.* Soaking at length in the bath, lathering each part, each fold of skin, I realized that, without the smell of his body and the accompanying fragrance of tobacco, that combination is unachievable. Even now I would be willing to sacrifice the best of—what? the years I won’t be having? the dreams?—in order to sense it again.

Curled up on his lap, his arms around me, attuned to a delicate sense of satisfaction, I am home, sensing the tranquility of belonging. I am at home.

*Ah, my rose, you’re the flower that gladdens my life.*

The high-flown phrase never seems false when he is holding me, when I listen to his voice, brushing a finger over his lips, sketching a circle around them.

*Why won’t you let me buy things for you?*

I can’t bring myself to answer him out loud although the answer is abundantly clear. How come he doesn’t see it?

*Tell me, what do you want? What do you really want? I can bring it for you.*

You, I say, my head buried in his chest, *only you.*

You have me, here I am.

For always, not like this.

He lifts me off his lap and goes over to his desk, entrenched in his executive chair in the position, which is familiar to me from previous occasions, heavy, weary and decisive.

*And in ten years time, when I’m shaking and drooling, you’ll be running up to the fourth floor with a young lover.*

The picture he draws is so droll that I feel like crying.

*I’ll always love you,* I say.

He looks at me pathetically.

*We’re not in bed now. Things like that are said in bed.*
Always, always, I say.
There’s no always, Dana. You’ll find a young man to your taste and
snap, no more old Yehoyada.
You’re not old. You’re younger than any young guy I know.
That’s apparently the problem, he says and looks at me, at least
as far as I’m concerned. Only rarely now, does he gaze at my breasts.
You must find someone. You must promise me you’ll find someone. I
don’t want to ruin your life.

Even when I find someone, I say, I’ll always come to you.
Wonderful, he says. The husband is at work and the wife is at her
lover’s.

The husband is at work, I say, and the wife is with her love.
Ah, my little swallow, says Yehoyada, who could have known that
this was the way it would develop.

Alone with my thoughts, absorbed in self-scrutiny, for example
on Saturday afternoons, when an inexplicable yearning stabs at
my heart, an end which generates a beginning but is still all end, I
know that there is no purpose to all this and I must escape. But I
lack the strength to do it.

Thinking about him by day, thinking about him by night, I
relive in detail every glance, every word, and every movement.
There is irreparable hunger for the smell of his body, his shrewd,
lined face, his voice with its never-ending reverberations.

At such times, I can’t even call him for support. He is at home,
with his adult children. Does he have grandchildren? I rack my
brains and fail to remember. Perhaps I never asked? His family
offsshoots are mysterious and superfluous, apart from one, splendid,
hostile, priestess, magician, and the invincible witch.

Nonsense, I say to myself at such times. If he really loved you,
he would leave his wife.

Nobody leaves his first love, the wife of his youth, I tell myself
like an agony aunt.
If I don’t have the strength to fight her, what power do I have over him – escape, Dana, save your soul; as for guarding it, you’ve already failed at that.

In those hours of reckoning, I know that I’m not capable of simply getting up and leaving. Even if I decide to end it, resolve that this week I’ll put an end to it, which is particularly easy, because I’ve taken such decisions dozens of times, I know only too well that at the first opportunity, next morning, I’ll telephone him at his little room at the university, or at his office in the afternoon and say: Yehoyada –

And my voice, low and wounded and devastatingly fragile, will immediately evoke the special tone:

My little Dana, what a pleasant surprise. Have you missed me? I’ve missed you too.

And I drink in the vacillations, am intoxicated by the few words, and rest from my tribulations for two more days.
Chapter 9: Unnatural Acts

Uri arrived just when I needed him, grabbed me by my hair and pulled me out of the quicksand.

* I must have done something good, I say to Dorit, and God sent me salvation. 

She demands an explanation. *What do you think you did? I cherished King David,* and we both laugh, she at the explanation and I from joy: a new way of life has opened up for me. We can walk out together in broad daylight, entwined, a couple, posing together for photographs, voicing declarations and demands, out in the open. 

*I was so exhausted yesterday that I couldn’t fall asleep,* says Uri, slowly sipping his coffee where two grains of cardomam are still floating, *The more tired I am, the more difficult to fall asleep.* 

On the wall above his bed is a map of the world with pins marking northern Scandinavia. 

*Have you been there already or are you planning to go?* I ask, pointing to pinned Lapland. 

*I spent time there after my army service. When I complete my internship and I have my license, I’ll take another trip, for two months this time, but I’m not sure I’ll go there. We’ll see. Have you been abroad?* 

*No.* 

*Not even to Europe?* 

*Once, with my parents. London, Paris, Rome, you know, the classical tour.* 

*With your parents,* he repeats, amused, and gets up to go into the kitchen. 

Uri is active even when he’s sitting; he jumps up constantly, bringing, taking, and searching. The more he darts about, the more
I retreat into my shell. Sprawled on his bed, cup in hand, I breathe in the aroma of the coffee.

*Have one,* he says, returning from the kitchen with a pile of cookies on a plate.

*When I finish my studies,* he says, *I plan to go as part of my two months.*

*How will you manage it?*

*I’ll manage. I always plan things so that I can manage. If not,* he says, opening the window and drawing the flapping curtain aside to let in fresh, damp February air, *I’ll take another trip or I’ll extend it. What’s the problem? Every problem has a solution,* he hums, echoing a radio commercial and I would like to be elsewhere, in a dark room with mahogany chairs and brocade upholstery.

*How about taking in a movie?* Uri asks, closing the window so that the curtain stops fluttering,

*Why not?* I respond cheerfully.

*You always reply with a question,* he says, irritated, surveying the pile of books on his desk, which looks as if it was bought for him when he started high school. *Did you buy a newspaper on your way here?*

*No, why?*

*There you go again, asking questions. To see what’s on, that’s why.*

*Don’t you read the paper every day?*

*What is this, an interrogation?* I ask, beginning to feel uncomfortable.

*No, really, I’m interested.*

*I’ll read it at home when I get back. My father always brings it.*

*A good girl from a respectable home,* he sums up, jumps up again, and returns with the weekend supplement. *It’s all in here,* he says. *What would you like, comedy, tragedy. I fancy an action movie,* he decides.

I am silent.
We decided, that is to say Uri decided, on a matinee.

We have nearly five hours to kill before the matinee, he says. What do you suggest we do? And then he throws aside the newspaper. Just a minute, I promised my mother I'd make lunch. Come into the kitchen with me, OK?

I'm happy to follow him into the kitchen, to play at being a young married couple busy with everyday chores, lighting the oven, peeling potatoes, he with the peeler, I with a little sharp knife.

Let's have a competition, he says, aiming at my ribs with his elbow and hitting my shoulder.

What's for lunch apart from potatoes?
Wieners, salad. We'll prepare a fruit salad for dessert. I've already peeled two and you're still on your first, he gloats.

That's easy. Look how thick your peel is and look at mine, I boast, showing him the long twist of peel hanging from the knife blade, leaving the white potato flesh almost immaculate.

It's not worth your effort, he says. You won't gain more than one potato out of a whole pile.

I know he's right, but I continue to peel with deliberate slowness, completing three to his seven which he dumps in a large bowl of water, carefully removing the brown eyes and the discolored patches, then cutting them into chunks and checking the water on the gas.

When it boils, I'll add salt, not before, he announces, and now for the salad.

Four tomatoes, three firm, he says, peering into the refrigerator, and one squishy one for grating. Do you like salad?

No, not at all.

But it's good for you! He squeezes the cucumbers and chooses two slim, crisp ones, gropes for and finds three shallots. A special bag to keep them fresh, he announces proudly. And now for radishes and lettuce. They're good for the complexion, did you know? Full of
Vitamin A. Rinse them thoroughly. He brings in a plastic bowl, sets it under the faucet, and turns to find a chopping board and another knife.

I rinse each tomato separately under the stream of water, inspecting its curves.

The soft one is disgusting, I say. It will ruin the salad.

Food is never disgusting, he informs me, returning with an apron: put it on so that it won’t squirt onto your clothes.

Wow, as a cook you really are a yenteh, I say, peeling the cucumber, slashing savagely at the shallots, tearing the shallots apart. You have to rinse them well in case there’s soil left, I tell him. And when everything is lying rinsed in the bowl, ready for chopping and grating, I have the vague feeling that I may have passed some test successfully.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, I say. Tomato – agvania. Have you read Brenner’s novel Bereavement and Failure? When the hero is burning up with fever, there are two pages where he philosophizes about the root agav - to lust.

Brenner?

Yes, you know, the writer who was murdered in the twenties during the riots.

So many murders, do you really want me to remember them all?

Well, do you know what la’agov means? I try another direction.

Give me a break! We’re cooking now, not discussing literature.

Look, small chunks, like this. And he slices the tomato in two with one swoop, like a skilled surgeon, then each half into parallel slices, which he cuts across, creating neat squares.

There’s a special slicer for that, I say, trying to dampen his self-satisfaction.

The pleasure is doing it by hand, he says, dismissing me. I want you to know, he says, suddenly raising his glance from the chopping board, most chefs are men!

They’re welcome to it. I hate cooking, I burst out with a typical
statement.

Really? He continues to slice with careful symmetry, shrugging his shoulders. I enjoy it.

And you think that peeling potatoes and preparing salad is cooking?

When I have a home of my own, he announces, ignoring me, there’ll be a different menu every day. He looks straight at me and a hidden message passes between us, although I fail to read it.

Was that some kind of test for me, I ask him later, as we clamber off the scooter at the old port where the river meets the sea. You nut! We were just preparing lunch because my mother asked me to.

Are you fond of your mother?

Another dumb question! He stares at me. Of course, isn’t everyone? And, faced with this simplicity, I am struck dumb.

Uri visited my home twice and on both occasions Abba was not there. Imma gazed at him joyfully, asked him his mother’s maiden name, what precisely he was studying, and placed a store-bought cake she had ‘just baked’ on the table.

I sat on the sidelines, glad to be making her happy, wondering what Yehoyada would say if he were there: would he back up her happiness, would he accept mine?

I hope you’re not going to tell him about us, Yehoyada says, concerned. You can’t tell how he might take it.

I won’t tell him, I promise.

How could anyone understand such a terrible story? A girl of twenty-two head over heels in love with an old lecher of sixty-four.

So is that how it goes? I ask Dorit. You cook together, eat together, go around together.

What’s wrong with that? She looks at me anxiously.
I don’t know, it’s… I don’t know…something’s missing. Don’t you feel inside as if, as if you don’t belong there?

On the contrary, she cries. That’s all the fun.

I read a Chinese proverb once. A good marriage means taking the road together but separately, I say.

The Chinese may be clever, but if the separate is really separate, then where’s the together?

In bed, I laugh.

OK, she replies impatiently, but you know that’s not enough. Not for the day-to-day.

In Hanevi’im Street, ground floor, a year before I met Uri, I lie still as Yehoyada’s hands cosset me.

Well, how am I doing? I ask the sorcerer.

I’ve prepared you for your next sexual partner, he says, referring to himself.

Tell me about the Frenchwoman.

Yehoyada likes to tell me about the women who have passed under his hands. At least some of them. None that you’ve ever met or are likely to meet, that’s the condition; he said the first time I asked for his confession.

The Frenchwoman, Germaine, was the prize exhibit. He met her while on sabbatical. She was thirty-one.

Thirty-one years crammed with experience, he smiles. The best of the crop.

Explain, I say, rubbing against his skin, absorbing his heat.

It’s a matter of temperament, of coordination,

Was she beautiful?

It’s not a question of beauty, he says. When a woman is a sexual creature, it shows in her eyes, just as I saw in yours that first evening.

I don’t know whether to be offended or flattered.

She knew when and where to touch, a drowsy snake that turns into a tiger. No, like a cat, a kneading, and purring, sucking cat. You
still have a lot to learn, how about it? he asks with a smile.

And I consent, but deep inside is the beginning of a refusal.

He pushes my head down to his groin. The one-eyed red stalk, showing signs of tiring before achieving satisfaction, is resting. Yehoyada’s pubic hair is turning white, it curls softly and, beneath the bony protuberance, the root sprouts, burdened with years and adventures.

*Hold it firmly, surround it,* and he grasps it in his hand till the head rises, quivering, awaiting me, as his other hand grasps my hair and guides my mouth.

*I know you don’t like this,* he says, *but you wanted to learn, didn’t you?*

*Slowly,* he guides me, *move all around it in a complete circle.* My lips surround the crown, sense the angle, smooth, delicate, try to hold close and to slide up and down at the same time –

*That’s good,* he encourages me, leaning back. *Like that, all of it.*

Adapting my movements to the pressure he is exerting on my head, press and relax, I move up and down, up and down, teeth covered, lips pursed and as to my tongue, didn’t I once read that it magnifies every detail fourfold? Moving awkwardly until it finds the natural rhythm, lips tightening around the crown, rubbing against the protuberance.

*Wonderful,* Yehoyada is beginning to display the familiar hoarseness. *Like that, exactly, go on-*

Little quivers begin in response to my movements, and I feel the hardening as the crown is pushed back by Yehoyada’s movements and butts forward, and then back again.

*Ah, that’s good,* he groans, *good!*

Lying back, he grasps my right hand to replace his hand on the root. *Grasp it tightly, squeeze and let go,* he whispers.

His freed hands begin a search of my body, back, breasts, down to the groin, seeking a path through the hair, between the outer lips, inward, while I squeeze the root, my mouth rising and falling,
and the muscles of my right cheek are tensed in a painful spasm.

No, Dana, he complains. Go on, more.

I can't keep my mouth open like that.

Go on, please.

And I go down on him again while his hand massages my cheeks, easing the pain, and the swollen organ disappears and reappears between hands and mouth, rubs against my teeth, fills my palate, my throat. My tongue licks around it, sometimes along the length, which blocks the air. He breathes heavily, hardens and I choke.

More, more, he repeats, his eyes shut, entirely mine.

His body, his soul.

His being??

Inert, my jaws aching, I am nauseous.

Ah, he yells as my teeth scratch him, and I pull away to escape him, take deep breaths, apologize: I can't, I'm choking, and he gazes at me with sudden sadness. You wanted to learn, didn't you?

Then he turns me over with my back to him, legs bent to fit against him, his hands stroking my breasts. I can feel him trying to penetrate

Where?

Dana is embarrassed, Dana is silent. Dana thinks, Dana wonders.

Dana read a large number of books when she was young. Historical novels, detective stories, and, under the covers at night, romance novels. She remembers vividly a hardcover best seller, in which a shrewd attorney saves a man accused of murder, because he was impelled by an uncontrollable urge. He killed the man who raped his wife. “The despicable rapist sodomized this frail woman”, thunders the defense attorney, and the jury is shocked to the core. I read two sex manuals from cover to cover before I found the definition, but I was still baffled. What did ‘unnatural acts’ mean?

Is that what Yehoyada intends to do to me? Is that what it
means?

He rubs against me from behind, his hands crushing my breasts, his cock pressing against my tensed body, and all my senses are focused on that place, awaiting the next move like a tightly coiled spring.

_Dana_, he says, _I'll turn you into the perfect woman._

The muscles of my thighs and buttocks are taut shock absorbers.

The penis rubs and presses, demands entry and is repelled and slides between my thighs. _Ah, you're wet_, he breathes. _Let it into my garden, my home_, he says, and I relax, still not knowing whether something happened or it was just my fears and he says, _let it in_, and I grasp the root and guide it in, a natural act, one I will never have to perform for any other man.

Yehoyada flees to the bathroom a moment before he comes. No, that's the wrong description. Yehoyada flees to the bathroom and I have never seen him come. I will encounter the hot, white spurting liquid for the first time with Uri. Yehoyada pulls away, jumps up hastily, disappears, returns tidily dressed, and the world beyond the walls and door begins to seep in again.

_Are you on the pill?_ He has put on his teacher's expression as he surveys me tenderly.

_No, it scares me._

_Go and see the doctor, I've been asking you for some time_, he complains. _She'll explain that there's nothing to be scared of._

_That's not true. Nobody knows exactly._

_How primitive_, he laughs. _You don't realize how privileged your generation is._

_Even so_, I reply. _What is it with you and that doctor? Is she one of your old loves?_

_How pig-headed you are_, he sums up. _You know_, he says, _you're a strange mixture of open-mindedness and obstinacy._
I don’t know whether to confirm his diagnosis or ask for proof and he adds: *Still waters run deep.*

How can I tell Uri about Yehoyada?
How can Uri – young, restless, self-confident and sure of his future– understand such a moonstruck love?
Am I even capable of telling him about such a weird affair?
Do I myself understand it?
I can’t tell Uri about my love for Yehoyada.
What could I say? I was sent to him for bibliographical guidance and he sensed that I was broadcasting sexual hunger?
I was sent to him to ask for material for my project and he kissed me?
I was sent to him and he gradually infiltrated me?
I was sent to him – and I fell in love with him?
*If you hadn’t slept with him you wouldn’t have fallen in love,* says Dorit, but Dana who hovers over the couch knows that Dana on the couch is not enjoying herself. She is surrendering, taking in, responding but not enjoying.
*I didn’t fall in love with him,* I reply, *I love him.*
And those words change their meaning every moment anew.

Even when I’m with Uri, who arrived like a deus ex machina to rescue me from myself, I am torn in two. Charming Dana, everyday Dana, Dana the student, Dana as Dana should be, helping Imma with the household chores, going off to the university, taking a part-time job to support herself. And then there’s the inner Dana, who lives in a bubble whose walls grow thicker from day to day. A thin crust of air sprouting chitinous cells, sketching a convoluted circle, a mythological maze without entry or exit. Without Theseus, Ariadne develops a sensitive birth cord, its antennae turned outward, absorbing information, emitting fog. Heaven help me if my true thoughts ever come to
light, if my true, bubble existence bursts.

Recently the roles have been reversed. Yehoyada defends Uri, I slander him.

*We argue all the time,* I complain, *He’s so childish. All men are childish,* You’ll find that out, he tells me.

*And he’s so young,* I complain again.

We both burst out laughing.

Dana over the couch knows Dana on the couch only too well, but she is forced to acknowledge the existence of yet another Dana. Step by step Yehoyada is fashioning the Dana he envisaged in his old dreams: the female-whore, the primeval lover, the perfect decoration for the orifice. *When you come in from your base tomorrow, don’t wear a brassiere,* he says and Dana travels on a summer-suffused bus. In the humid heat, heavy breasts round out the shirt front, the nipples prominent. Dana stands at the back of the crowded bus. Awaiting Yehoyada’s hands, the young breasts bounce to the jolting of the wheels. Dana stands slumped, her imitation leather purse slung over her right shoulder, its strap rubbing against her right side. Dana is pensive. Her discomfort tinged with shame is gradually yielding place to vague satisfaction: *I did it!* How sweet is the satisfaction to be derived from secrecy.
I don’t play-act, never, I say to Dorit. We are sitting in the museum café, casting casual glances at pictures on the wall, sipping espresso, or is it in her new apartment in a development for young couples in a new suburb. A one-bedroom apartment and a dog.

That’s why you lost Uri, she replies. I told you that you needed to play-act.

Actually, when I was with him I did. I never told him about Yehoyada.

That wasn’t important. What you don’t know doesn’t hurt you. I’m talking about a different kind of play-acting, playing hard-to-get. You never knew how to do that. And that’s what the idiots want, isn’t it? How can they feel important if you give in easily?

I don’t give in easily, I say, offended but knowing she’s right.

There was one incident I never confessed to Dorit, although we tell one another everything as soon as it happens. I preferred to forget. What you don’t tell can’t hurt you. But shame expanded in me like yeast in dough. I remember the words so well, and the tone:

What have you done? The voice is accusing, stunned, lower than usual and slow. You know how I’ve dreamed of doing it, how I’ve planned.

And I want the earth to swallow me up.

Is that my destiny…never to live up to the dreams they nurture around me?

Uri celebrates Pesach with his parents and his sister, his uncle and aunt and his three cousins. I spend it with my parents and the neighbors, a childless couple. Uri and I have been together for almost two months. Hand in hand. We see movies, snack on falafel.
When the Seder ends, I’ll come by to pick you up.
When?

You’re going out now? my father comments. What’s this weird habit of going out at 11 pm?
Why doesn’t he come up? Imma asks.
He doesn’t like to disturb you so late, I explain, and it’s hard to find a parking space.
It’s not difficult for a scooter, Imma insists.
He’s driving a Volvo, I say, it’s his father’s. And they both fall silent.

Uri is waiting on the sidewalk, tall, well-groomed, leaning on a green jeep, with plastic side windows and metal doors.
I see you had time to change clothes, I say, in partial apology for my own festive attire, a two-piece chiffon dress with a wide skirt that catches on the hard metal seats.
Where are we going?
You’ll see.

From the main thoroughfare we turn onto the coastal highway, making for Herzliya. We join a long convoy of cars loaded with children and parents, survivors of the Seder, heavy with food, and bleary-eyed. Tipsy car lights cast long shadows on the road. Half-heard sentences escape through open windows, merge with nocturnal sounds, the shriek of a bird, light music.

We drive northward and he turns onto the road through Herzliya to the sea, flashes past a sign displaying a curvaceous girl in a bathing suit diving into the water and continues to the right, along the beach.
Look at that. I want a house like that.
Listening, afraid to respond. I don’t know if I am included in the planned future or if I want to be included.
We pass the US Embassy, drive around a square and continue
northward until we are on an unpaved path leading to the sea and ending beside a ruined mosque.

This is Apollonia, he announces, parking the jeep on the edge of the cliff, not too close, not too far, fixed between rocks and sand, engine switched off waiting for what is to come.

It’s nice here, I say, still not knowing what lies ahead.

Yes.

Whose jeep is it?

It belongs to a friend. I planned it all.

So this is it, I think, it’s going to be him. It must be him. Why not? Someone who is always torn between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and always chooses ‘maybe’ probably needs someone like him. He marks out his target clearly, aims and fires at its center.

What do you mean, you planned it?

You know, the place, the beach.

What about spontaneity?

Spontaneity? Oh, give me a break! It’s there when needed, but the most successful events are planned ahead, he laughs, gazing at me proudly. Get that into your head, right in, and then everything will work out right for you.

You’ve thought about this a great deal, I say, trying to flatter him.

Yes, I talked it over with my mother.

Your mother?

So what? Why the surprised tone? She’s very shrewd, though perhaps not always right.

For example?

And he leans over to me, places a hand on my shoulder. She thinks that you’re not right for me, for example.

Not right? Why? I ask flatly, denying the anger and misery that flood me, black and blue like bruises.

Because your people don’t have a great deal of money, he says calmly, and pulls my shoulder towards him. Sounds terrible,
doesn’t it?

Money isn’t everything in life, I say casually, cheerfully. Age-old and irrelevant wisdom.

Come on, let’s go down to the water, he says.

The roar of the sea reaches my ears, like the rustle of hundreds of autumn leaves crushed underfoot. We walk hand in hand along the cliff, my blood thickened by insult, breathing in the salt, damp smell. A full moon casts a milky glow on the waves far below, onto the horizon, up to the end of the world.

My head is level with his shoulder, he is tall but not gawky, and a deep peace descends on me. After all, it was nothing but words, and what can words do? They scatter weightlessly in the air, syllable by syllable. A body is something different, firm, close at hand. Warmth passes between our hands; his finger is linked with mine: moving around it, tapping gently, tightening, and transmitting a sense of belonging. Filling me with peace.

I love the sea, the foam on the waves, the rumble of it.

In high school I loved surfing, now I scarcely find the time. I also liked to spend my summers on the beach. I took my notebooks and studied on the sand.

Were you a good student?
Not bad, I say, proud of my modesty.

I was kept back for another year in the tenth grade, he says. It was because I used to play hooky and go to the beach instead of school.

Really?

Yes, and I stayed in the same school. What a fuck-up. But in the end, I graduated with honors. I promised my mother I’d take my studies seriously, and with me, a promise is a promise. In the eleventh and twelfth grades I put my nose to the grindstone and never went down to the beach, would you believe it? Only in the vacation.
We are standing at the edge of the cliff, the beach primroses at our feet, jagged rocks, pebbles and sand.
Let’s sit down.
The moonlight casts a yellow glow on the flower pattern of my skirt, darkens the blue of the chiffon.
It might get dirty, I say and sit down. A tiny stone pricks my right buttock, and I focus on it, classifying the sensations: sharpness, foreign body, me, us.

His body heat is transmitted through his cotton shirt, his heartbeats pound in my right ear. Gently, I rub my cheek against his shirt, and close my eyes. An enchanted sea, milk-colored flashes on black velvet. An excited pulse.

It looks like I’m really crazy about you, he says suddenly, his voice sounding distant, never mind what my mother says.

Me too, the words burst out of me all at once, from a place I hadn’t known existed.

He lowers his head, his lips are warm and demanding, and my mouth opens. His wet tongue searches my mouth, my tongue flutters to meet it and they toy with one another, touching and fleeing, searching and reaching.

Where did you learn to kiss like that? he says as he pulls away, panting.
I had an instructor.
And only then do I realize what I’ve said.
Who? He straightens up.
A professor. There is no retreat now.
A professor?
Yes. Never mind. It’s ancient history.
No, it’s important to me. Tell me. And now there is a space between our bodies.
I came to see him in the twelfth grade for advice on a project and he asked permission to kiss me.
And that’s it?
More or less.
That’s not logical. Tell me all about it. I’ve told you about Hila.
No, really. Nothing happened. We simply used to kiss. He taught me to kiss.
What’s his name?
What does it matter?
What are you hiding?
What do I have to hide? It was all years ago. Does my voice reflect the pressure building like tiny, sharp pinpricks at my temples? It was when I was in the army. I worked for him, helping him with research, that’s all.
You worked for him? What’s his name?
Professor Yakir Yehoyada.
Sounds familiar, says Uri. What did you do to help him?
I typed. He dictated.
Were you together in his room?
Yes.
Alone?
Not always.
Where?
He has an office. I’ll introduce you to him if you like.
You’re in contact with him?
No, very little.
So why do you want to introduce us?
Because you’re asking so many questions.
I’m trying to understand, he says, and I don’t understand a thing. Moving closer to him as the sea retreats, I try to close the sudden distance between us. The warmth of his body relaxes my tense muscles, my warmth softens his. Uri yields, kisses me again, this time slightly aggressively and I respond to the craving roused in me by the night, by youth, by mention of Yehoyada, by the desperate need for warmth.
Where did you learn to kiss? I say, trying to draw simple
parallels.

Like everyone else, trial and error. Why didn’t you tell me about your professor when I told you about Hila? he insists.
Because it wasn’t significant.
Kissing like that? How can you say that? Did he try to feel you up?

Not really. He tried, but I wouldn’t let him.

Explain that, please.

He tried and I said no.

You said no?

Yes.

And that was enough?

Yes. I’ve already told you, the whole thing wasn’t serious. I worked for him by the hour and that was that. It was for pocket money when I was in the army.

Show me that son of a bitch some time, Uri sums up, still close to me, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

It’s cold, can’t you feel it? I hug him, all muscle, snuggle in. He smells of sweat without after-shave, and now I know: this is the way life should be. He’s the man, I’m the girl. He’ll do the thinking and deciding, planning for the future. He’s the head, I’m the neck. Clear, solid ownership flows in the blood. Yehoyada’s time is over and done with. Life is knocking at the door, young and bursting with opportunity.

Let’s go back to the jeep, Uri suggests. There’s a blanket there.

And we stand up together, walk side by side, thigh rubbing against thigh, my right breast crushed against his left side. The wind and the night and the fragrance enwrap us. Young and handsome. I know that now. Young and beautiful. Young.

Uri opens the metal door and gazes at me. What does he see?
Are you very cold?
Mmmm, I say coyly.
Let’s sit inside.

He climbs into the back seat and I follow. His body is long, mine is soft. His arms are round my back; my arms are round his waist. I sit beside him and wait. We’ve known one another for almost two months, going to the movies, munching falafel, holding hands and I’m still waiting. The heat of the first real kiss is still on my lips. Uri is in no hurry; his heart beats steadily. Perhaps he’s not interested? Perhaps he’s not attracted to me? I find it hard to cope with this tranquil, well-planned restraint.

He said: ‘I must be crazy about you’; that means more than ‘I love you’, says Dana to Dana.

Big deal, so he said it, says Dana to Dana. So what, you said it too.

He said it! He said it. He said it? Dana repeats. Doubt gnaws and swells.

God, please make sure that the knight you sent me doesn’t run away.

Uri leans over. Shall I warm you?

Mmm.

Searching under the seat, he brings out a grey army blanket.

It’s dirty, but if we spread it over the seats…

We’ll warm our backsides, I laugh, lifting myself up and he spreads it, straightening it meticulously till it’s a perfect rectangular, army-fashion. When I sit down again, back in his arms, I feel his hands: the thumbs are hard against my back, and the four spread fingers touch my breasts as if by accident.

It’s uncomfortable, crowded, still cold, but who cares. Wordlessly I accept his gropings. I experience everything anew, as if for the first time.

Hila was the first girl Uri ever slept with. The mythical first, he smiles, savoring memory. We’ve just finished throwing the uniform white cubes of potato into the enamel saucepan of boiling water.
Manufactured in Germany, he reports, no cracks. And a minute later: Did you know that my uncle was involved in Eichmann’s capture?

Really?

Yep, he says, top secret. But that didn’t stop him from buying a Volkswagen/.

Why not. If you want quality…

I know at least two families who wouldn’t dream of setting foot in Germany, and don’t allow German-made goods into their homes.

There are always extremists, I say.

Why extremists? Are principles extremism? They decided not to buy German goods. People with principles!

Are they fanatics?

Why do you say that? Why are you badmouthing them? You always find something bad to say.

That’s not true, I protest and fall silent.

We leave the potato chunks in the fiercely bubbling water and return to his room. His biblical-style sandals are flung down beside his Adidas running shoes under the bed and he throws himself down lightly. I look around for a chair.

Ah, come on, he says, stop being such a holy virgin. Come here.

I’m not… I start saying as he leaps up from the bed, goes over to the window and closes the curtains. Darkness at noon.

The last girl who was here was Hila, he says suddenly.

Your girlfriend?

Yep. From the twelfth grade on. Four years

Did you love her? I aim straight for the target. All the rest is superfluous.

Very much, at the beginning. She had tremendous tits.

Fantastic.

Why did you break up?
She was in a hurry to get married after the army.
Did you sleep together?
What a question? Back in the twelfth grade. How about you?
What about me?
Have you done it?
Not really. The words tumble out easily.
Are you a virgin?
Yes.
You’ve never had a serious boyfriend?
No.
Wow, I’d never have believed it, he says and suddenly leaps up and runs into the kitchen. I forget to take the wieners out of the freezer.

Awaiting his movement in the jeep, I can feel how the rush of blood is overcoming my patience. Is this the power of habit, memory of Yehoyada’s sophisticated caresses, his hands that played music on my body?

Uri, I whisper, adopting a soft tone in memory of Yehoyada’s voice, warm, low, yielding: Uri.

Dana, he responds in a hoarse voice.

Leaning backward under his weight, my back pressed against the door handle, I surrender to his hands as they stroke my blouse, burrow under the short sleeves, caress the soft skin of shoulder and breast, flutter in my armpits. His lips are on my neck, sucking, biting, moving away, brushing the blouse. I am engulfed in his warmth, trembling, and it is as if we’ve been split in two: from the waist up entwined, from the waist down planted unmoving on the metal seats, transfixed.

Dana, I detect a hidden, almost strangled note. My fingers comb his hair, knead his tense, sweating nape, damp in the cold night air. The heat of his mouth seeps through the blouse and brassiere to the waiting skin, thirsty for a new touch.
You know, he says, pulling away for a moment, this is the opposite of Pesach.
What?
From freedom to slavery instead of slavery to freedom.
You mean that being together is slavery? I protest once I understand his meaning,
Mmm.
Are you serious? If it is, then it’s sweet slavery, I say, trying to tone down his statement. I become aware of the pressure of the door handle just as I pull away from it.
I’m going out for a piss, he announces, suddenly leaping out and I am left in the jeep, at a loss.
Confused and uncertain, I wonder what he means when he talks of slavery? To what is he committing when he talks of love? Is he committing at all, to what is he referring? To whom? To me? I don’t understand myself so how can I understand him?
Perhaps it’s the sea murmuring and muttering promises, or the beat of blood which overcomes my paralysis, spreads through my limbs and invades each cell: perhaps it’s the dark, which offers solutions which daylight renders shameful. – Awaiting his return, I recall the way he says Da-na, his voice monotonous, choked. My doubts disperse and I calm down. He’s a boy, nothing but a boy, I think to myself. I’m experienced, a femme fatale. Why not make things easier for him, remove obstacles? Hastily I slip my hand behind me, unfasten the brassiere but leave it in place, awaiting one light touch in order to be liberated when he comes back, when he touches.
There’s another car outside, he says when he returns and leaps in.
I wonder what they’re doing.
The same thing as us, silly, and again the door handle digs into my back and we cling together in a kiss, our tongues together and his hands move down, crush the soft chiffon which transmits his
awkward, searching movements to my skin and he shifts down to my hips and then up, touching flesh and I catch my breath. He freezes for a moment, encouraged by my silence and continues, stroking my belly and moving to my back, climbing up. How did I know, I think happily as his fingers grope, searching for the hook and eye and stop suddenly.

What did you do? His voice is unfamiliarly slow, accusing. You know how I’ve dreamed of doing this, how I’ve planned…

Doing what? (If the earth would only swallow me up!)
All night, he continues in the same tone, talking to himself.
What do you mean, all night?
Without responding, breathing heavily, he tears off his cotton t-shirt, pulls violently at the blouse and brassiere and throws himself on me, crushing, heavy, one hand on my belt.

No, I decide in a flash, no!
Deaf, he tears at the belt, goes below it, his hand on my panties, trying to pull them off.

No, I rebel, Uri, no! Trying to escape his heavy body, tense with anger, I shout at him and my voice sounds shrill and alien. Stop it. Enough!

What reaches him? The note of fear in my voice, my struggling? He halts, then pulls away from me and sits up, staring at my thighs, exposed by my disordered clothes, pale and lost, and the chiffon blouse, under which the displaced brassiere has distorted the shape of my breasts. His eyes are screwed up. An unfamiliar combination of anger and astonishment has curled his upper lip. Suddenly he shrugs his shoulders, slips on his shirt, zips up his pants and I, at the same time, straighten up, tug my skirt over my knees, restore order to my brassiere under the blouse, each breast back in its cup and decide to turn my back on him.

I can’t reach. Would you please fasten it?
How clever!
His fingers are short and thick. What makes me remember
them now? They trail on my back, their touch hot and alien, finding it hard to connect hook to eye, trying again. I sit upright, with a dancer’s neck, feeling lost. Nothing happened. Did something happen?

It needs practice, he sums up after succeeding and moves to the driver’s seat.

Are you planning to stay in the back seat? he adds, glancing at me in the mirror.

No. I step out of the car. The wind ruffles my skirt; living flowers are crushed under my sandals. The lower seam of the brassiere is cutting into my right breast and I adjust it, my back to the jeep, before I open the front door and sit down.

The engine stirs into life like a racehorse, speeds forward. The car lights illuminate the other cars parked there and move hastily aside. Two strangers, dense silence. Uri grips the wheel, his fingers whitening, while I am enclosed in stubborn, determined certainty. Nothing happened. Nothing. A brassiere can become unfastened on its own.

I can still feel the door handle in my back, I complain in a childish, soft voice.

Uri switches on the radio, tunes it to songs of the army entertainment troupes.

I’m tired, he announces. Tomorrow I’m going to sleep in.

My muscles relax. The wind smooths my hair, caresses my face. We drive out onto the coastal highway.

Uri glances at his watch: Only one o’clock.

You’ve got all day tomorrow, I reply.

I have to return the jeep.

Who to?

He needs it tomorrow. They’re going on a trip to Galilee. His girlfriend is an eyeful.

Who? I repeat.

I was planning for us to join them in the morning.
Why not, we can still do it, I say hastily.
No, he interrupts me.
What’s wrong? Really, I don’t understand? This time I’m the one insisting. Perhaps you can explain.
Nada, he throws at me, almost barking.
We’ve almost reached Ibn Gvirol Street. I’ll call you, he says as I clamber out by the entrance to my building. It was almost fantastic, wasn’t it?
Idiot, thinks Scarlett O’Hara as she skims up the stairs. There is a burnt-out lamp at the first landing, a dim light at the second. Tomorrow is another day.
Chapter 11: The Very First Time

I'm a second-time love, Dorit once mourned after reading a story in some forgotten anthology of world literature. I'm not blonde, I don't have such a great body, and you need to know me in order to love me.

That's not true, you're lovely. I tell her, angry at her for also wrestling with doubts, that's my line. You have a cute little nose, and lovely eyes. And, in any case, it doesn't matter to you anymore; you have Itzik. If anyone fits the description, it's me.

All right, both of us then, she agrees to add me on. People need to get to know us, to see us again. We’re more interesting the second time.

That turned out to be untrue, because Yoram fell for me at first sight.

The leather jacket, the line for movie tickets. How a random encounter can determine a lifetime. Every day we grow more accustomed to one another, the friction points are eroded, corners smoothed. If water can wear down stone, surely life together can wear down souls.

It isn't a great passion but I'm 25 and I've already been through two loves, isn't that enough? I ask Dorit gingerly, for fear that she will say no.

I don't know. Maybe you should wait.
For what? Till I become a dried-up old virgin?
No danger of that, as we know!
Never mind, stop that. You know what I mean.
No, I don't.
I think you do. The fire in the blood, what I felt when I waited in the street for Yehoyada to be free. Those palpitations.
You're a masochist.
Ah, stop it!
No, really. You don’t have to feel like that when you’re in love. It’s not healthy and it doesn’t last.
But you’re wrong. You felt like that with Itzik. You used to talk about him all night.
I was always in control.
That’s the word, I think, what’s known as the battle of the sexes. Let’s see who is stronger, who thinks less, who achieves the ippon.

Uri called after two days, and, on the telephone, which I leaped to answer, he sounded the same as always:
Hi, Dana, are you free this evening?
Shall I check my diary?
I’ll be outside at ten.
Aren’t you working?
From five to nine thirty.
Great.
Not so great. I’m losing money that way, but there’s someone higher up the ladder who wants the hours.
Will you come up?
No, it’ll be late. Wait for me outside. Bye.
He was gone before I could reply.
Standing before the closet, the perfect outfit always missing, I dither until the answer comes to me: neither chiffon nor velvet, just jeans and a t-shirt, a student of Eretz Israel history in biblical-style sandals. No, don’t exaggerate: plain sandals. Hair drawn back into a ponytail held with a wooden clip. I like my look, the slim silhouette, the full bosom, and the waist almost slender enough for two hands to encircle. Just the way I used to look, says Imma, a compliment I would prefer not to receive.
Are you going out like that? That’s no way to dress in the evening, say my parents in chorus as I pass through the living room on my
way out.

We’re not going to a party.
You look like a schoolgirl.
So what?
And I don’t like the fact that he’s stopped coming up, Imma repeats. Is it so difficult for him to collect you from home, to come in like a well-brought-up young man, to say hello?

It’s late
And he won’t find a parking space, she says, mocking my usual reply.

I told him not to come up, I lie, not willing to admit that there’s something in what she says. When we go out early, he’ll come up.

Put on some lipstick, she says, accompanying me to the door.
Leave the maydeleh alone, says Abba.
A little mascara, it makes such a difference.
No, I reply from the stairwell and flee.

The street is alternatively lit up and dark and twin-eyed cars approach and speed by. Leaning on the rough-barked ficus tree at the entrance I’m waiting for one of them to arrive with flickering lights. But it’s ten past ten and where oh where is he?

Waitin, waiting again, always waiting. Some girls have dates who come up to the apartment, bring flowers, chocolate, tickets for a show, but you ride on the back of a scooter or wait in the street till the light goes off.

Some girls.

You were never a girl. At 14 you already thought you were a grown woman, inexperienced but a know-it-all, with the world and its sorrows on your shoulders. Everyone makes the bed he is going to lie on, says Grandma Knows Best, which means that everyone is me and you and the bed, the bed. My thoughts are abruptly cut short as a single light approaches jerkily.

Hi, he halts beside me, this road is dodgy at night.
Why, what happened?
There are potholes. Climb on.
Where are we going?
Why do you keep asking me that? Don’t you have a will of your own?
It’s late for a movie.
Can’t you think of anything but a movie?
I don’t fancy anything specific. Why don’t you decide?
Just a second, where’s your coat. You’ll freeze.
I thought you’d bring the jeep.
Nope. Take a coat. I’ll wait.

What’s going on, cries Imma and Abba gives me a worried glance over the newspaper.
Nothing. I want to take a coat.
Be careful with that motorbike.
It’s a scooter.

And now I’m sitting behind him, keeping my distance. Uri pumps with his right foot until the engine sparks into life, speeds forward and I am thrown back, clinging to his waist and his black motorcyclist’s jacket and my woolly duffle coat slides against it. Hold tight, he says, maneuvering among parked cars, waiting edgily for the traffic light to turn green, and speeding along the coastal highway.

Apollonia again? Has some stratagem been devised which will erase the previous one, create a day without a yesterday? An improved substitute? A spark of joy stirs inside me.
Did you work hard? I yell into his ear and the wind scatters the syllables.

Uri is wearing thick gloves which are not superfluous even at fifty kilometers per hour. Currents of cold, damp air whistle out of the groves on the eastern side of the highway, penetrate my open collar and attack my toes.
Funny, I shout, I took a coat but I didn’t think of socks.
Waa, he shouts which I decipher as “Want to go back?...”

No, I yell. My hair is flattened, my eyes are watering from the wind, the lane markers have blended into a single strip, approaching and receding rapidly, disappearing under the wheels. I warm my hands in the pockets of his fur-lined jacket, and conceal my sandaled feet behind his sneakers. I am with him, to the very end, even if I die of cold.

To our left, the tower of the Wingate Sports Center rises in the dark, and Uri turns right onto a dirt path leading to a parking lot. The scooter lights illuminate a shabby expanse paved with brownish-grey gravel.

We’ve arrived, he says, waiting for me to descend, leaning the scooter against a multi-branched eucalyptus tree with brambles twisted round its trunk, jagged leaves and entwined prickly branches. One hand is clutching his backpack and the other is stretched out to me: come on.

We walk along the paths, tinged yellow by a full moon, which is beginning to wane, and I am filled with joy. Why not dare to call it bliss? The silence is filled with life, the rustle of branches, the cries of night birds, small creatures seeking prey, the crunch of leaves underfoot. Hand in hand, fingers twined, squeezing from time to time as if to say: I’m with you again, we’re together.

I’m crazy about nature, says Uri. It took me a long time to make up my mind between law and medicine.

Did money calculations win the day?

Money? No way. You can rake in money from both. But I decided that I can make it easier in law.

Because of the possibility of planning?

Call it whatever you like. I call it guts and brains.

And I’m filled with pride. What does it matter what happened once, if it did in fact happen. Now he’s here at my side, this man is at my side. The world and I are at his feet.

I waited for a phone call yesterday, I tell him.
I didn’t have time.
Could you explain what happened the day before yesterday? Why were you so angry?
It was fantastic, wasn’t it?
I give in. Our trampling footsteps, the stones shifting, the branches swaying – all promise me: everything is fine, Dana. That’s life. Don’t conduct reckonings.
Have you any idea where we are? he says, after a silence.
Wadi Poleg. What’s in your backpack?
A blanket. What did you think it was, a bomb?
There’s nothing original about him. You think of everything, I say, preferring to flatter him.
It’s time you got to know me, and his complacent voice stops me saying what I almost said as we dismounted from the scooter – How is it that we manage to succeed the second time for every unsuccessful first time.
A dried-up stream to our left, flat-topped hills to our right, dark patches of poppies and buttercups, abundant golden gleam of groundsel, chrysanthemums and anthemis even now at nighttime. We climb in single line up a narrow path to the top of a wide mound, Uri leading and I gripping his hand.
This is it, he says, opening his backpack and pulling out a woolen blanket:
Grab hold.
We grasp a corner each, stretch it taut into a grey square and lay it down, burying grass and flowers, and Uri jumps onto it.
What is it with you? Why are you always so heavy, he says? Come here.
I want to be fresh, smiling, cheerful, and I don’t know why a tense, thick silence envelops me as I move onto the blanket, to him.
He holds out his arms wordlessly, in a language, which even complete foreigners can understand. I move into them, trying to be
engulfed, to find a haven and a hiding-place, never imagining for a moment that perhaps he is seeking a hiding-place in me.

_I love you_, says Uri between an embrace and a kiss, and I respond with fevered hands which crawl under his shirt, with writhing movements as my body responds to his fingers on my back, and the pale night reveals us to one another naked and hot, on a hill in Wadi Poleg, to the sound of croaking frogs and buzzing mosquitoes, rejoicing in one another like innocent children. My body is pale and soft, his large and hard, and we absorb one another’s skin, heat, softness, a reprieve from failed attempts, wrong intentions, transmitting to one another compassion and closeness and trust. There are no doubts, no words, a thick dark forest between my legs, an upright mast between his. He gazes at me, I gaze at him, the moonlight lends a soft mistiness to our eyes and the wide gaze confirms – this is truly my first time, I think, innocent and ready.

What does a man feel, what does a cock feel between the tightly closed legs of a girl as they open up and absorb?

_“Hot and wet,”_ Yoram replies.

_What does a woman feel?_ Yuval answered with a question.

I never asked Yehoyada.

I didn’t have time to ask Uri. As I lay on my back, submitting to his touch, ready to absorb his caresses, Yehoyada suddenly appeared behind my back, within my eyes, in the inconceivable grey cells of my brain, a stubborn demon, waiting like me, focused, to assess the invader.

Uri’s cock is large and thick, intimidating. His body on mine, leaning on his elbows, he maneuvers his narrow pelvis between my opening thighs. The rounded crown, a flat-topped mosque, burrowing, locating the softness, which does not impede it, the young, narrow passage. Uri pushes himself in, and the opening stretches around him, each push felt, heightened. _It hurts_, I tell
him, in surprise, happy.

A virgin.

This time he halts. Lies like a heavy stone, waits for a second, a minute, an eon.

No, I reply to the unasked question, we need to get it over with. I don’t want to stay a virgin.

And he immediately continues, presses in a little more and retreats, his body rising and falling, slow, heavy, increasing, intensifying, and the pain swells and is instantly blurred, overcome by new sensations of breathlessness. Uri is sprawled on top of me, full length and heavy, his eyes closed, concentrating, driven by a mechanism which is more powerful than he and his kind, and I groan, fighting for air, trying to free myself, my mouth gaping to take in breath, squeezed between his neck and head, my breasts and lungs crushed under his weight. Ah, ah, ah, my gasps blend with his panting, and Uri tautens, utters a thick sound suddenly, rears up and then pulls away, spurting a white, thick stream onto his hand.

So this is the first, official time in the annals of Dana nama, femme fatale with evidence to prove it, who outdid Germaine, and lost her virginity twice; once to someone who wouldn’t permit himself to believe in its existence, and a second time to someone she wanted as a lawful and successful breadwinner.

Some girls have it sewn together by a doctor, Dorit laughs, and some manage to pretend. How come you, how come he...how come he didn’t notice?

It really hurt, I say, defending Uri’s honor. Hurt terribly.

So explain that to me? she says forgivingly. You’ve been sleeping with your professor for several years and suddenly along comes a young man and you’re a virgin again?

I don’t know either. But it’s a fact.

A fact?
But it hurt.  
Soon you’ll succeed in persuading yourself as well.  
Stop being such a monster. I felt it entirely differently.  
Not like a pencil?  
On the contrary. And he didn’t need my help. He didn’t ask me to guide him with my hand, do you get it? He can get erect quite independently.  
And it wasn’t like that with Yehoyada?  
And now I’m embarrassed for Yehoyada. Don’t know. No, no way.

Uri has a large, thick cock, which only returns to its natural dimensions when viewed from the distance of years. A tall young man with an average cock, at night on a hill, screwing a girl who is used to having sex with an elderly man.  
It’s beginning to be late, I say as he wipes his hands on the tall crabgrass, scared of the silence blossoming between us, refraining from asking: Will you still want to see me? Not skilled enough to play a part: You’re wonderful, it was great!  
It was fantastic, he says, this time tenderly. Do you want to get dressed? His hand touches me, relaxed, delicate. He is tranquil, a state I will come to recognize in his case, and with others, after they’ve come. Warm infants who’ve had their fill at their mother’s breast. He places his damp hand in a gesture of ownership on my belly, and then moves up to my breasts.  
I don’t fancy dressing, and in order to annoy Yehoyada whose mocking gaze I see, I pull him towards me, hug him, assure him, persuaded.  
It didn’t hurt so much, I say, not like they tell you.  
Uri is silent, and I am filled with false confidence that everything is going to be OK. The past is over, the future is open and two young people, one clever the other shrewd, are beginning their lives. Flesh has touched flesh; the souls will meet some day.
And indeed, the torrent has died down, blood is flowing easily, and my fingers and toes are beginning to transmit warnings of freezing.

Nevertheless, Uri says, let’s get dressed, and I look for my clothes, starting with panties, and at home I will discover that I have put them on inside out. I do up the clasp of the brassiere in front then shift it round to the back, well aware of his gaze following my movements, and then the t-shirt, jeans, sandals. Did something happen? I ask with a smile, trying to overcome the kitsch, which threatens to overwhelm me, seething inside, invisible outside.

Uri ties his sneakers, his long back bent with lazy grace, his fingers busy with the laces. I hate those short, thick fingers, hate them.

Are we going back? Already?

He jumps up. Why? Anything else you need to do? A smile softens the question. Want to come to me? And I want to say yes, to be hugged, to burrow in, to make love.

But what I say is: No, nothing.

We fold the blanket, four hands at four edges, into a half, a quarter, an eighth, pluck off long leaves, thorny circles of alfalfa, clover seeds, and Uri picks it up, smoothly folded, shoves it into the open backpack, swelling its length, an indifferent, pathetic sexual device.

Well, how’s my heart, I ask. Do I have one?

Heart?

Dr. Tamarin says no and laughs. In the elongated black-and-white of the scan he reads poems I never studied. Reversible, he mutters to himself, calculating, pushing up his spectacles to the bridge of his nose. His round body is planted in the chair, proclaiming ownership. When I lost a great deal of weight and my swelling belly began to send up owl snakes with gaping mouths
and eyes from my depths up to the chest, back and even shoulders, my primary-care physician sent me for all the possible tests. Bled, x-rayed, scanned, going from expert to expert, from ego-trip to ego-maniac, from the patient expert whose gaze proclaims his superiority to the arrogant expert whose movements and words were statements, petty gods playing at God – I am beginning to hate them.

*Everything is fine*, says Dr. Tamarin, *the septal is beginning to be blocked, the epical is also showing signs, a diet could help, physical activity, but all in all your heart is pure titanium.* And I leave him encouraged, happy, only to hear the other, ultimate sentence next day from the gynecologist.

Pure titanium. Not mine. Mine is pure sponge. Coral, but not coral from the clear blue-green waters of Eilat Bay. Moving without stirring, stirring without moving, don’t touch and don’t tear and don’t damage, sincere, like me, all-absorbing, seeing-hearing-feeling-swallowing and remaining whole. It’s a miracle heart, enduring from one disappointment to the next, blossoming each morning anew into the open sun, smoldering in secret. Alive, alive without living.

Neither muscle cells not electrical impulses, not the seat of wisdom as medieval sages thought, or the realm of the emotions, as the poets claim. Just a flexible sponge, contracting and expanding wildly, drinking in without expelling, floating from day to day like a bladder in the innards of a fish.
Chapter 12: Calculating the Dosage

Vicky!

The accursed pain. Creeping owl snakes beating at me with hard wings. The pill is meant to work for at least six hours, to prevent the inevitable onslaught of pain, the attack on the synapses, which occurs in an instant and without warning. Evil creatures, hissing, lurking in wait.

In another 16 hours the hospice team will be here. A cruel timepiece, which misses nothing out, a compassionate timepiece.

Don’t worry, Dr. Hockstein assures me, we’ll prepare a cocktail, which will make you feel better. The treatment is planned in such a way, she says, turning to Yoram, that Dana will not be in any pain. That’s our task, to prevent pain. That’s why we’re here, for no other reason. And she looks into his eyes, to ensure that he has heard what was not said but was clearly defined, and then returns to me: If something else happens, not pain, you should contact your primary-care physician. He’ll deal with it, is that clear? We see to all the rest. If you stick to the schedule, she turns to him again, you’ll have twenty-four hour coverage. I promise you, she turns to me again, we’ll try to ensure that you don’t suffer.

Why did I agree to let them come? I should have objected, forced Yoram to plead, to stammer, to be embarrassed by the certainty of his gaze. Let him flush, let his eyes dart, let him pretend.

Not That’s the way it is, Dana, what do you prefer. His ability to say: That’s the way it is, Dana, his decisiveness, as if it’s a question of preference with me. As if there is another that. That’s what there is, Dana. All your shit.

If you want it, you can have it – if you don’t want it – you’ll have it all the same.

Now he’s listening calmly, trying to look distressed. I’ve
changed my mind, please go, and vanish...go away all of you.

_The pills I prescribed_, I hear Dr. Hockstein’s voice, the light reflected in her spectacles, _will take effect before the pain sets in_. _That’s why it’s so important to take them in time._

_It will certainly change_, she says in reply to a question I did not hear, and from the way she inclines her head in his direction, I understand that it was Yoram who asked. _But then the scheduling of the pills will also change_. Or we may change them. _Just let us know when it happens._

_When what happens?_ I ask. _If you don’t mind, you’re talking about me._

_Of course, Dana_, Dr. Hockstein smiles, _I’m just asking you to let me know how the cocktail is working_. _Each individual responds differently_. It may take time before there’s a full effect.

_The team will come once a week_, she continues in a business-like voice, now looking directly at me. _We have a duty nurse on call twenty-four hours_. _She’ll answer any questions_. _Don’t be afraid to call at any time._

She opens her briefcase, square scuffed leather. She could be a teacher or government attorney as she takes out an official hospital form and begin filling in the details of the medications, page by page.

_I calculate the dosage according to the condition at the moment_, she announces as she writes, _and you must note down the drug in a special notebook and the exact time when you administered it_. _That way we’ll be able to follow it up_. _Michal will explain_. _Just a moment_, she adds, straightening up. _Who will be here with Dana all the time?_ Looking around, she spies Vicky and leans back, reassured: _Great_. _You’ve found a Filipina_. _Excellent_. _With a wave of the hand she co-opts her onto the group around my bed._

_You’re very experienced_. My voice sounds indifferent.

_Absolutely_, and she straightens her spectacles. _I promise you, Dana_, and her expression is suddenly open, _that we will fight the
Michal is taking over ownership of Vicky. They are standing in the corner of the room, a thin notebook between them. Why so thin? Does the number of pages add up to the number of days allotted to me? What are they talking about? The social worker is sitting beside me; I can’t recall her name. The bustle of first introductions created confusion in my head. Is she Tova? Rocha? Perhaps Shurka? It’s some kind of diminutive. If I allowed it, she would be stroking my hand and telling me her life story.

*I understand*, I tell them, *everything is clear. Let’s live and learn how it works.*

*It will work smoothly*, says Rokhka, Shurka, smiling confidently and ignoring the “live”.

*From experience? I ask again.*

*From a great deal of experience*, she confirms, and does not take my hand.

*Vicky, a pill. Hurry, please!* Will she bring me the phone again now?

*How long does it take you?* You, idiot, I complete the sentence, meanwhile to myself. Four damned hours. This time at least she doesn’t argue. Familiar sounds reach me from the kitchen, the slamming of the medication drawer, and the door of the refrigerator.

The spoonful of mousse with the crushed pill is in my mouth, and, washing down the remnants of the bitter sweetness with mineral water, I know that all I can do now is wait. Memory games won’t help. Life is stronger than my imagination, whose yearning only brings me ultimately pain of another kind.

I haven’t seen Yehoyada for a month and it’s been almost two months since we slept together.

*So these are your promises*, he says with a mischievous
expression. You don’t have a husband yet but you are abandoning your lover.

It’s the exams, I say evasively, lying peacefully between his legs, between the lean arms, breathing in the familiar smell.

And perhaps, I add defiantly, there really will be a husband.

It’s about time, Yehoyada says, twisting his lips, and children, how many?

That’s enough! I pass a finger over his lips, stroke his cheek, slip a hand under his shirt whose whiteness no longer dazzles me.

Come on now, he says, your grades are not that great. I don’t see you sitting in libraries, so what’s left if not marriage and children!

Oh, really, I try to soften the criticism, tickling the graying hair on his chest.

No, Dana, really, I don’t like what’s happening here. This young man is turning your head.

What makes you say that? I protest, unable to decide if the paternal role he is adopting is to my liking.

I’ve checked, he says. And apart from that, you don’t call me, you scarcely ever come. I’ve no way of contacting you.

Have I been waiting for this tune four years or all my life? Unbuttoning his shirt, I kiss the hair that my hands have caressed.

Stop it! He moves my hand and pushes me away. I was wrong; you are a little bourgeoise.

There is an irate, offended flash in Yehoyada’s eyes when he is angry. It sparks off a pleasant and powerful emotion in me. I go over to the couch, sit down with legs together, angled to the right, aware, oh very aware, of the skirt sliding up the thigh, the brassiere strap exposed on my shoulder under the sleeveless blouse.

So you’ve found the suitable provider and everything between us is unimportant?

No, it’s very important.

That’s not how it looks.

Pacing up and down the room, between the desk and the door,
past the bookshelves, he slowly tamps down the tobacco in his pipe, hands detached from mouth. With the aid of a small metal tamper he packs the curling threads of tobacco he takes out of a black leather pouch.

*I expected you at the beginning of the week, and you didn’t even bother to inform me you weren’t coming.*

*But I did tell you,* I try to recall, *I had an exam.* Suddenly I see the picture clearly. Sitting in Dorit’s new apartment, sunk into a giant artificial leather pouffe, we are discussing the possibility that she will abandon her studies at the teacher’s college and transfer to an interior design course. Working with her mother has become burdensome, and she wants to put an end to it before it becomes intolerable. *I’m not enjoying it,* she says, describing precisely what I cautioned her against. *Do this, do that, that’s enough, and anyway, how long can I wipe bottoms and sing baby songs?*

*Will you be able to keep up?*

*External courses of the Haifa Technion, in the evenings, why not?*

*If I were your mother, I’d pay your school fees.*

*Don’t exaggerate, but if I can go on working part-time –*

*Why shouldn’t she pay?*

*Because she claims that kindergarten teachers make the best mothers.*

*And you’ll have the same vacation schedule as your children.* I’m familiar with the argument, at first hand.

*And you’ll acquire psychological understanding of children,* Dorit laughs.

*Strangely enough, the most disturbed children in school were always the psychologists’ kids, like Yochai.*

And in between the floods of laughter, the name evokes the smell of the sulphur he spilled in the school yard, the wet floor our teacher slipped on, the mud balls he threw at the map of the country and his strange awkward hand movements in the gym. I recall a trip to the Carmel forest when he hid in a cave while
everyone searched for him. As I take deep breaths to quiet the
spasms of laughter tensing my stomach muscles, the mention of
Carmel reminds me of Zikhron Yaakov and Zikhron reminds me
of Yehoyada and Yehoyada of . . . .

And now too, just like then in Dorit’s apartment, new and
sparsely furnished, which no interior design could render more
attractive that its neighbors, I feel the stab of wonder at the miracle
that is occurring:

Wow, you won’t believe this, tomorrow I’m due to visit Yehoyada
but I made a date with Uri.

Dorit, wiping her eyes after the bout of laughter, her lips still
stretched from yelling Yo-chai, Yo-chai among the trees of the
nature reserve, adopts a serious expression and says only one word:
Wonderful!

I didn’t even remember that it was our day, I say wonderingly. I
only remembered when we mentioned the Carmel just now.

Wonderful, Dorit repeats.

It means a lot, doesn’t it?

Sure. Will you call him to tell him you’re not coming?

You know what, I think aloud, recalling waiting in the street,
the hesitant telephone calls, summoning up the sound of his voice
before I fall asleep, the long love letters written on duty nights, and
a new, unfamiliar emotion, a blend of indifference and affection,
nothing but affection, leads me to continue: Why not? On the way
home, from the public telephone. Why should he wait for nothing.

But on the way home, walking with Dorit and her husband, all
three of us licking ice-cream cones, I tell them about Uri’s work as
ticket collector and copy editor and Yehoyada is forgotten.

I’m not senile yet, Yehoyada fumes. If you’d told me, I would
have remembered, and he lights his pipe, emitting the fragrance
of Dunhill, not the Mac Baren plumcake, not Erinmore, not the
Davidoff I once brought him in an fit of love.

It’s not a problem, he says. It’s a healthy process, but I’m not
willing to wait. You must tell me.

I don't have anything to tell yet! I am losing my confidence. We've only been seeing one another for a month and we haven't even kissed yet.

Really? Yehoyada smiles, now on safe ground, and immediately sits down beside me, his hand on my nape, bringing his mouth close to mine, his eyes closing as he gives me a light, smiling kiss, lips open without the invading tongue. Little Dana, take off your blouse, he says, opening his own shirt.

My blood is not stirring; a faint sorrow is replacing the adrenalin.

Isn't there anything to type? I ask, as if I were still a soldier coming to earn a little cash, as if I’ve forgotten that because of personal squabbles and political intrigues the budget has been delayed and the book about Alexander will never be written, and if it is written, it will not be written by Yehoyada.

Can't we wait till we're in the apartment in Hanevi'im? I continue.

You're right; he concurs too fast, definitely and straightens up, buttoning his shirt.

Da-na? Want to see news?

Standing beside me, Vicky is holding the remote control. Antonella from the soap opera has long since stopped weeping and I, lying in the leather lounger, used up my ration of tears three months ago. My dry, sharp eyes discern the right outline among the misty shapes: Vicky in a flowered dress, clutching the remote control.

No, I say, no news, no TV.

Just me.

Dana, Dana, softie Dana.

Without Yehoyada...without the Bedrock...without a man or a profession or an academic degree, first, third, or second, me for
once, just once, me. Without anyone else, without surroundings, without hope, without a dream.

Without me.

What if, instead of ‘no news, no TV’, I said: Vicky, leave me, I want to be by myself, with that something I can’t define but am already used to, I’ve lived with it for more than forty years, I’ve gained experience in how to deal with it, just leave me alone.

Her almond eyes would stare at me inquisitively, perhaps slightly hostile, and what would she do if not run and telephone Yoram. Da-ana dangerous, don’t understand Da-na, and he would come, in his slow but certain way, when he was free, bring out the Valium and the Prozac, and summon the home hospice behind my back.

My ‘me’ is absolutely fine, Yoram. The pain is quite OK too, I’d say if I could find the words in time, but he wouldn’t listen. Dr Hockstein won’t listen and Michal will slip me the pill in disguise, like she did with the Ritalin, which I eventually agreed to take out of simple curiosity. If I hadn’t known what it does to hyperactive children, I might have been more determined.

An anti-depression pill, that’s their way of preserving the ‘me’ within acceptable frames of reference: among all the things that are not, he. That’s how they ensure that we won’t define ourselves without them, won’t escape to a place where it is impossible to cheat because there is nobody to cheat, only yourself, and when you are faced with yourself – the illusions melt away. That’s how they prevent me from defining myself without the other, remaining open-eyed and sober, and they succeed. It’s a fact. Me.

Swallowing pills.
Summoning up memories.
The men in my life.

Proving each time anew that there is no repose for me without Yehoyada, without the Uri incidents, without the Bedrock. Even Yuval. I would not be me without them, not then, not now.
And if I can’t define myself even now without them, when could I, when will I be able to.

The last time.
What distinguishes it from the first, apart from the faint, pampered regret?
First of all, knowledge, because the first time is immediately experienced and interpreted as being first, while the last time only becomes the last in retrospect. Two years before the earthquake, wrote the prophet Amos, thereby revealing his impermanence. I never again slept with Yehoyada, never will. In the remaining years of our relationship, the final six months overlapping with the Bedrock, we stayed in touch through casual conversations, even more casual meetings, warm embraces when I arrived, a soft kiss when I left, and eventually only a handshake.

Without words, without explanations, as if under its own momentum, a new pattern is established.
The invitation to my wedding was sent to him by mail.
Yet even now, in the leather lounger, my feet raised, eyes closed, I still long for the marvelous primordiality of Hanevi’im Street. The skin crying out for touch, the exposed nerves, and his delicate, bony hand, insisting of continuing where younger men were not permitted to go. The age blotches on his skin, the lines of wisdom on his forehead, under his eyes, around his mouth. If this blindness is not love, then what is?
Chapter 13: That’s It

Uri loves nature and I am beginning to love Uri. From day to day I learn to appreciate his outlook on the world, the finality with which he judges events and people, the ease with which he solves problems, even those he has with himself.

For me, everything comes in pairs: statements with questions, decisions with doubts. ‘On the other hand’, I say, and ‘there are two ways of looking at it’ ‘two sides to the coin’ and ‘the truth lies somewhere in between’ and other such wise sayings, worn by constant use. Uri has no problems. Tomorrow at ten means tomorrow at ten even if it turns out to be eleven, and if two people are lost in the desert with only a small flask of water to save them from dying of thirst, the owner of the flask will drink it all and survive instead of sharing it until both die.

Do you understand the idea, Uri says, ownership is the key to life, in Judaism as well. Nobody can tell me tall stories about the material and the spiritual. There’s no spirit without matter. Period. Spirituality is luxury.

I am impressed. Women are supposed to be impressed. How many years have gone by since then? Twenty-five? Twenty-three? A hundred? What is time worth without the idea: spirituality is superfluous luxury. Superfluous? Is it? I am impressed but I don’t show it. I don’t show it but it may be assumed that he notices. The way he looks at me, waiting for the flash of admiration in my eyes, my full concurrence. My silence. Uri has a sharp tongue, a confident way of thinking, can be unintentionally hurtful. But I am not offended; there is nothing to offend me. I am immune to all that. The planning of our joint future silences all doubts. We’ll look for an apartment to rent, complete our undergraduate degrees,
travel abroad. He’ll study at the London School of Economics, I’ll teach Hebrew. People tell me that today’s women are no longer adoring; they take the initiative, make decisions. They don’t have to tell me, I can see for myself. I can read. In the newspapers there are stories about the young generation. Piss off, they say. I fucked him till his hair curled, they tell one another. Strong women, each with a giant cock. None of them get screwed: they do the screwing. We waited, tormenting ourselves, for the phone to ring. If it didn’t ring, we went on waiting.

I can’t stand Uri’s friends, just as he can’t stand mine. They dance and drink in a large apartment, second floor in a building eroded by the sea winds and by salinity till it is entirely pock-marked. He introduces me to his friends: white-teethed smiles, spectacles, beer glass in hand, a woman with a cigarette holder, delicate long fingers, a hand with a cigar. Come and meet them, this is so-and-so and this is so-and-so and that’s…. I feel lost when he disappears among them, his laugh loud then silent in various corners of the room.

Can we go now, I ask, discovering him leaning on the wall facing a girl with long, light hair, I have a headache.

Right away, his shoulder lifted impatiently. Meet Micha’s sister, I introduced you to him earlier, my best friend, and I can’t remember if Micha is the hand with the beer or the hand with the cigar, just that his sister has a warm, delicate smile. Uri leans over her, relaxed from years of acquaintance. In the hallway, struggling with the buttons on my coat, I say bravely: She’s very cute, Micha’s sister. But Uri doesn’t hear me, just says, Do me a favor. I don’t need to hear from my friends: Who’s this girlfriend of yours who doesn’t shave her legs?

And what parts do you shave for us, I say angrily.

I shave my face, don’t I?

That’s not the same.
It’s exactly the same.
As far as I’m concerned, you can grow a beard. You don’t shave on
my account.
Why not? I want to look tidy, not scruffy.
But hair is natural, I say. You love nature.
Not on women.

After he’s brought me home, I go into the bathroom, see the
hair, delicate stubble, not yet long, flattened between skin and
nylon, and sense that he was right. A woman should be shaved,
smooth, purely nude, a woman should be a woman.

You’re warm and soft, so feminine, says the Coincidence when
we meet in his apartment. A three-storey house, lithographs by
avant-garde artists on the walls. A giant philodendron branching in
the corner, a collection of ceramic Hanukka candelabra on the wall
beside the front door.
Wow, I say, how spacious.
The living room opens up onto a small lawn, with a willow
tree, its branches drooping, and a plastic swing close to the trunk.
Large house, small yard, I sum up.
Don’t go out, Yuval says, alarmed.
As we drove into the parking space, he darted glances all
around. Locking his Peugeot 405 with the remote control, gripping
two files, anxiously, surveying the windows of the neighboring
house.
There’s a busybody there, he whispers to me across the roof of the
car. Walk behind me as if you’ve come to collect papers.
And I walk upright, leather briefcase, high-heels. Who is she, I
ask as we go in. Doesn’t she have anything to do all day?
She’s an accountant, as it happens, but she spends a lot of time at
home.
Poor thing!. I permit myself to be patronizing.
Not at all, we’re the ones to be sorry for.

The ‘we’ hangs in the air, and can be interpreted in three ways: he and all the rest, he and his wife, he and I. The key is in the lock as he continues: Once she saw a neighbor coming in his lunch break with his secretary and immediately told his wife.

What? I am shocked. But that’s not the case with us, is it? I’ve come to collect papers.

Precisely, he smiles and the heavy wooden front door opens on to the living room.

The house is filled with signs of Tamar. Little clay statuettes of heavy-thighed heavy-breasted women on the bureaus, complex macramé decorations on the walls, on the wooden rocking chairs, metal kettles serving as plant holders, copper salvers.

Tamar is artistic, I try to be complimentary and Yuval answers from the kitchen:

What? He comes out with two glasses of concentrated orange juice. This is all we have. What did you say?

Thanks. I sit down on one of the armchairs. I said that Tamar is artistic.

Definitely, he confirms, no question about it.

Artistic Tamar has gone to visit her parents in kibbutz Sdot Yam, Omer is in kindergarten, Yael at school. And Daddy has dropped in with an old friend, on the cleaning woman’s day off, at a time, which is not free but has been cleared, to give her some material which has been waiting for years in the chambers of his heart and in his balls.

It’s already 12 o’clock, Yuval glances at his left wrist. I’m free till one.

And then the kids come home?

No, first I have to take you back to town, and then I’ll come back to collect Omer.

An ideal father.

Not just a father, he smiles at me, and hastens to add: It’s
Tamar’s job, but she took advantage of my free day to visit her parents and I…. 

Are you sure she’s at her parents?

Yuval freezes for a moment, and then an ironic smile softens his features. Who knows, perhaps just the way you’re at your parents…

Stop. That’s enough. I no longer have that excuse.

I recall the excitement of the meeting at the hospital. The image of my father in his final days, pale, choking, hits me like a blow, forcing me to take a deep breath: You see, something good comes of everything bad, even death. For a brief moment I believe every word.

Now there’s no need for words. We stand up together. Yuval leads me to the bedroom, holding my hand as he did on that evening in the tenth grade, his fingers strong and dry, and I fall into a darkened room: a faint light emphasizes the blue curtains, the turquoise of the bedcover, three pale blue cushions arranged in a neat triangle.

Everything is blue, thinks Alice in wonder. Does she arrange it like that every morning? I query.

Absolutely, Yuval says proudly. Tamar is wonderful, and he pulls at the fringes of the bed cover which folds softly into blue-green, green-blue, and as he places it on the bureau, I go over and turn back the pale blue double blanket, and expose a pale-blue striped sheet and white pillowcases with blue borders. Your pajamas are also blue, I can’t refrain from saying and suddenly spy myself facing me - cropped hair, long silver earrings, a pants suit - duplicated with a twisted smile in the large mirror facing the bed.

The bathroom, if you need it, door to the right, says Dr. Yuval Carmi in his professional tone.

The two of you thought of everything, I tell him, smoothing my hair at the mirror. It’s angled exactly at the height of the mattress.

If you’re doing it, you might as well go all the way, he smiles in satisfaction.
We also planned…
But you don’t have one, if I remember correctly…
We apparently weren’t sufficiently interested.
It’s not too late, he sums up. Are you coming?
Who has the money? It must be her, I think in the roomy bathroom off the parental bedroom, sitting sideways on the toilet bowl so that the tinkling sound of urine flowing down the sides won’t reach the room, gaze at the little bottles of liquid soap, the perfumes, the glass jars containing fragrant dry herbs, count the glass doors around the bath, decorated with flowers of the same color as the ceramic tiles on the floor and walls.

Somebody is obsessive, I decide, it’s pseudo-trendy and unoriginal.

Oh, Dana, Dana, does it occur to you what Yuval may have thought when he was in your apartment?

I, at least, have no pretensions. A wide, black wooden-based bed without bedside tables. A grey wall-to-wall carpet. A plain acrylic curtain. No macramé, no plant holders. A 20 x 20 sketch of a faceless nude woman by Ofer Lalouche, an Egon Schiele reproduction of a naked, yellow boy-girl, a grey line hesitantly covering the genital delta; a page torn carefully out of a large album of Picasso’s sketches, in an aluminum frame. An aging satyr with erect penis, stretching out a hand to a girl.

There’s a great deal of eroticism in that sketch, I say to Yuval as he goggles at the picture. We are both trying to camouflage the excitement of the first time.

Yep, he confirms. We stand entwined over the bed which has two duvets spread on it, each with a cover of a different color. He gazes into my eyes.

Yoram bought an album of Picasso sketches from Blackwell years ago, I say, trying to overcome my nervousness by talking too much, and this picture captivated me. It has a kind of crude eroticism. I smile
at him: *It’s unbelievable, Yuvush. A woman of thirty-five, no longer a girl, and I’m so excited.*

*So am I,* he whispers in return. The loyal canine gaze that I recall from childhood appears in his eyes. Can we make up for what we missed? I look away from him, sensing the beginning of the old trembling, but this time it begins in my chest, soon it will reach my legs, and erupt in uncontrollable quivers.

*Dana,* he strokes my hair, his hand lowered to my neck, *I can’t believe it’s happening to me, to us.*

As if in a silent movie, he begins in slow motion to pull the angora sweater over my head, dropping it on the floor, crushing me against him as his hands slip under my silk shirt, and I unbutton his flannel shirt with a blue tee-shirt beneath it and he takes his hands off me one by one, to slip out of the sleeves, and the clothes drop slowly, piling up, the tee-shirt on top, and I am left in the black brassiere I chose so carefully only a few hours ago, and his light, thin chest is exposed, and we are crushed against one another, and I’m sure he can feel on his skin how my body is trembling.

*Just a moment,* I pull away and run to switch on the heating, and when I return he is sitting on Yoram’s side on the bed in boxer shorts decorated with blue and red circles, and I hastily pull off my pants and jump under the duvet. And when we are together, protected above and beneath by layers of warmth, I take off my brassiere, he removes his shorts, and body meets body, only his hands between us, his beautiful fingers on my breast and his voice reaches me from a distance: *Do you know I fantasized about you when I was a boy?*

*We’re not strangers,* I tell him again, *why am I shy? Thirty five and shy.*

He hugs me in confirmation, perhaps in gratitude, and groping down below he removes my panties, slowly, and I help and whisper: *It’s first time shyness, you know, we’re not so young anymore.*

*That’s OK, Dana.*
The body is not what it was, I insist.
You know that’s not what’s important, he says and kisses me, and, full of gratitude I feel, in addition to tension and curiosity about the strange body learning about mine, something soft and ephemeral and focused and fragile which perhaps, if it lasts and grows stronger, I may try to call love.

Uri loves nature and I, apparently, love him. What began as an opportunity to escape Yehoyada into something, which seemed appropriate and worthy, namely a student with a promising future, is turning into the real thing.

Imperceptibly, my daily life is becoming context-dependent: that was before we discussed the Eichmann trial; after we went to see Fellini’s Rome; a day after our fierce argument about Waiting for Godot; before the binge in the Bezalel market.

It’s a pleasure to get into bed, alone, As I relive words and looks, a bubble of drowsiness crammed with scattered thoughts envelops me and Uri is in all of them. His eyes, his restless lips, his toes, square white nails on pink. Dana and Uri Koren. I cradle the name, so suitable as if I had been born to it. The immediate future is clear, the distant one follows behind: after our BA we’ll go to London, he’ll study for his Ph.D, Dr. Uri and Dana Koren. Back in Israel he’ll become a partner in the law office of Herzig and Nahum, friends of his father. The complex cases await him, I await him at home, waiting, wai-ting. Am I smiling before sleep descends, airy and satiated?

The mornings are also different; contented alertness opens my eyelids, energizes muscles going with a shot of adrenalin. None of the doubts, the shame and the sense of sin that marked the beginning of my relationship with Yehoyada. A promising morning guarantees a day, which, even if it proves disappointing, will be replaced by another. Whatever happens, I know, I will never tell
him about Yehoyada. The threatening shadow of a 42-year gap which, even now, I fail to understand. There are no stories of lack of paternal love, analyses of deficiencies, popular psychology, to supply excuses or pardon.

What does it matter, I conclude firmly, tossing in bed, what does it matter what happened and why. The main thing is that it happened. In the past, finito. From now on, only the future.

One evening seven weeks later, as the Shavuot festival ends, after the traditional cheesecake, Uri comes up to the apartment and sits in the living room on the corduroy armchair, his long legs stretched out. Imma serves mixed nuts in a silver bowl, Abba throws him a hasty smile, scrutinizes him at length and returns to his newspaper.

How are your parents? Imma inquires.

Fine.

And your studies?

Fine.

Would you like some coffee?

No, we’re going out.

We’re going to a party, I say, standing up, we have to go now.

Abba looks up from the paper. Have a good time, children.

Imma gazes at Uri with a blend of apprehension and reverence.

Be careful with that motor bicycle, she says, and we’re already outside, in a perfumed night in which only the loveless will smell petrol fumes and the stink of garbage cans.

There’s no party, says Uri before we board the scooter. Why did you tell them?

I don’t know. No particular reason.

Why say things for no particular reason?

I don’t know, to provide a reason. I thought you wanted to leave right away.

I don’t say things without a reason. He is educating me and I am
shivering.

Seated behind him on the scooter I assume that the language of the body is stronger than the language of reason and can set things right. We slice through the air, my hair surrenders to the wind, my hands are in his pockets, against his sides, my heart expands, heavily, filling my chest, leaving no room for thought.

Uri shifts branches aside and I clutch his shirt from behind. *How come you know all these places?* I ask admiring-flattering. *What’s the problem?* *Shouldn’t we go back to our hill?* *Nothing there is ours.* *Well, of course not,* I protest, *I didn’t actually mean ours.* Always the same. Good intentions are overturned. When will he be capable of understanding not only the words but also the expanse of meaning around them, which is them and not them and much more than them? With time, I tell myself, reassure myself that too will come. When we get to know one another, when we are used to one another.

*It’s scary here,* I tug at his shirt, childishly, and Uri halts and places a hand on my shoulder in a protective gesture. *Does the dark scare you? You weren’t scared in Wadi Poleg.*

Thin furze branches poke fingers at me, striving to stab, while croaks and chirps tell of invisible seething life. Uri’s body thickens the darkness, which was already dense.

*I don’t know why.* *It’s simply because there’s no moon, that’s all. Nothing to be afraid of.*

We continue walking. I am safe in his embrace even if it is uncomfortable and awkward, and I adapt my strides to his. Now right, now left, lengthen them in order to fit in with his captivating clumsiness, until he stops beside a small clearing, empty of bushes, elevated, spreads out the blanket, and I huddle up inside it. A
hesitant peace burgeons inside me, bestowing security, still limited, but promising that from now on there are two of us, for better or worse.

_It’s not scary any more_, I say girlishly and Uri smiles: _It’s not cold either_. And we undress one another, with measured haste, our bodies gleaming in the dark.

_I fancy being a nudist, look_. Below his white pelvis, never exposed to the sun, a black triangle is swallowed up by the dark.

_You too_, he laughs, his hands on my breasts, white as milk.

We enjoy one another, each movement reveals a hidden muscle which was awaiting this particular moment, this particular caress which insinuates itself between the thighs, burrows in and flees, climbs the back, sending shivers down to the toes. Focused inner attentiveness mounts in me, tracking every movement, every sign of movement, his curved hands on my back, mine on his, he slides a hand along my thigh, and my hand is on his thigh, moving up, cupping his testicles, coarse and soft with small hard globes inside, childish, capricious, threatened?

_Dana_, Uri groans.

_Uri_, I say in return.

Just a moment, he says and sits up, his hands slackening, and he looks out at the field outside the blanket, and my eyes, now adjusted to the dark, also discern grass and bushes, and close by there is a fragrance of citrus mixed with sage, soaked in by the senses which are now free to absorb it.

_I’m looking for something, wait a minute_, says Uri, as if I were likely to run away. I am lying like a heated stone, burning in the dark.

He stands up, naked, his body a tall shadow, disappears, returns after a minute and leans over me, holding lupin leaves shaped like tiny hands with fingers, and lays a leaf on each breast.

Why aren’t the words there for me when I need them?

Watching him, my heart is pinched with love. Stabs of blissful
pain. This, this is precisely the man I want to spend my life with, to grow old with, even to die with. What does a young woman know about dying apart from the word itself? A glorious end, like a first night performance. The leaf is rough on the delicate skin, concealing the nipple, shadowing the slopes. Uri leans over me again, his hands on the leaves, his fingers in the spaces between the leaflets, presses, caresses, pushes, and I submit, an actress larger than life.

*Are you measuring something*, the words I didn’t want to say are blurted out.

He is silent, and we continue stroking one another eagerly, driving off the chill of the night, creating vapor. His hands are between my legs, my hand on the root of his warm, swollen cock, which rubs against my body, and suddenly, he sits up again, and my hand falls onto his thigh.

*Just a moment, I want to give you something*, he is searching his pants.

Again I can’t find the words. The night is perfumed, the leaves are on my breasts, the silences, the touching - magic which requires no interpretations. It’s obvious to me what he wants to give me - bodily harmony has generated harmony of thought: what will he produce from his pants pocket if not some ring inherited from his grandmother, or a diamond engagement ring. I’ll be content with a narrow strip of gold bought with his earnings. A curtain ring. You are consecrated to me, Dana, he will say, with this jewel, pretend jewel, not only through the sexual act. Here, in the open, the two of us alone, in this dark magic night. A hot moonless night, benevolent.

I too sit up.

Waiting.

Dazed.

Uri scrabbles in one pocket and moves on to the other, takes out a small carton, tears it open and hands me the contents.
*Put it on me*, he says simply.

A long minute passes before I understand.

Dana exaggerates, Dana is funny, Dana pretends. What’s so terrible? Is this the first time you’ve seen a condom?

No, but it’s the first time I’ve held one. Flat nylon, smooth and dusty. I don’t know what to do with it and how. That is to say, I know what it’s for but not how.

*Let me*, Uri takes it from me, rolls it in his hands, blows into it and hands it back to me, as if it were a flower or a box of chocolates, and I, in whom only Yehoyada can read what is outwardly invisible, approach the erect cock with shaking hands as Uri gazes at it proudly, and slip on the thin condom from the rounded crown through the flexible stem, unrolling it downward to the root, and observe without laughing the dwarf’s cap on the insolent and helpless head. So simple, as if I were born to do it.

In the bedside table beside the blue bed in the blue room with the large mirror, Yuval keeps a pile of condoms. Made in France, 99.9 percent safe. Emerging from the bathroom in the parental suite, clean and dry, waiting for Yuval to climb in beside me, I hang my clothes on the round blue wooden hanger. My soberly-cut suit and ivory shirt on top of Tamar’s toweling robe and orange batik pants. Yuval is beside me, undressing slowly. Where’s the fire? The fire. We have an hour. Quite sufficient according to the rules to which we have accustomed ourselves. A year of hasty fucks in my apartment, in friends’ apartments, but this is the first time in his house. And here too unease burgeons, absorbed in the air.

*Could she turn up suddenly?* I ask, slipping off my high-heeled shoes.

*How should I know? There’s no reason.*

*Perhaps you should telephone her parents and we’ll know for sure, you’ll be calm.*
I'm perfectly calm, he replies with a note of anger and turns to the bedside table, takes a condom out of the pile and puts it on the tabletop, close at hand for when it will be needed.

Like a married couple, I laugh, burrowing under the blanket. More or less, Yuval joins me.

Once, sometime and somewhere, in some book or other, I read about a man who used to give marks in his notebook to the women he slept with. Erga, a young woman I met on my last job, described to me mockingly and confidently the sexual prowess of the project director: It's a pity I added him to the sample I'm drawing up, she said condescendingly and we both laughed.

She at her memories, I out of envy of the freedom of choice she knew how to exercise.

I too give marks, to myself. I no longer need Dorit. I draw up a balance sheet of technical know-how, evaluate the factors: size, shape, functioning, time, creativity and investment. The calculations are made before and during and after. The great femme fatale, collecting pubic hairs in a silken purse deciding who is to be dispatched to hell, who to the perfumed garden, and the bottom line is missing.

A fox is fleeing its hunters on a rainy, gloomy English morning, befuddled with terror. Wet from the raindrops, it darts among grass and bushes as damp as its fur to a sudden gaping opening, as hot as a den but larger. Uncomprehending, it finds itself in a church. The smell of ancient mold is covered by the odor of wax, and although not a single candle is lit, people are sitting among the pews, kneeling, asking the dead and the resurrected God to continue pardoning them. The fox stands among the pews petrified with fear. People are kneeling, focused on prayer, merchants, farmers, teachers – all of them are hunters.

How did all these hunters reach the den? asks the fox. How
did they become so numerous?

How did the fox reach the church? People ask without raising their heads from the prayer books. How did it make that mistake?

The fox does not know what a mistake is. It has only just reached maturity and its muscles are filled with oxygen, its tail is thick and reddish, and were it not for the freezing of its nerves, it could even fly. People are still absorbed and kneeling but are already planning how to surround the passageway and close the door, how the dogs will wait beside the openings and windows, and what they will do with the fur, one square centimeter each.

One centimeter each? The strongest of them suddenly rises from his kneeling position. What nonsense? It’s all mine.

His movement frees the petrified fox, which runs amok among the tables and the people, bangs against the wood, the cloth, the iron, misses the entrance. Even if it grows wings, how will it escape? There are vast windows around it, all filled with stained glass, and there are hunters there too, trapped in glass, casting colored light.

*Imma,* I shout, *Imma, a fox.*
Chapter 14: Come to the Swings

Vicky is at my side, holding a small towel, wiping my sweating face.

_Shhh...sh_. says Vicky, _Sha sha....shh_.

Startled, I see that it is still night, the television is flickering on CNN, and I am on the leather lounger, my legs wrapped in a blanket, trapped.

It’s only ten o’clock by the large pendulum clock I inherited from my grandfather, an elongated rectangle on the wall of the dining niche. Another long night. Once, I would have said the night is young. Immeasurable weariness in all my limbs. My fingers are frozen, there’s numbness in that blood which is still flowing, pulsing with effort. No hunger, no nausea and no sadness.

That in itself is a cause for celebration.

_Go to sleep?_ asks Vicky.

_Somebody called?_ I try to prolong the moment.

_No_. She is already smiling.

_Yoram?_

_No-o._

_Berta?_

_No._

Her slim body is close at hand, her dark hand lifts the light blanket.

_Nobody, Vicky, sure?_

_Yes, yes_, and she laughs heartily, her teeth shining.

One evening, after the meeting of our scouts’ club, in the ninth or tenth grade, who can remember, Yuvush walked me home. A bunch of five of us left the clubhouse and in the end the two of us were left. It was a steamy humid evening, dense with hormones. Walking side by side, hand brushing accidently against hand, high
giggles, dozens of tiny antennae focused at the spot where flesh met flesh.

At the entrance to my apartment building, before the ‘See you tomorrow’, we look at one another. His eyes are a light, cold blue with a doggy gaze, repelling me. But tonight, more alert than usual, troubled without knowing what has troubled me, I see in them only the promise of proud fidelity, of treasure which, if I know how to recognize and discover it, will allow my reign to commence.

You know what, I say to him, and before I can continue his eyes light up, I don’t feel sleepy.

Me neither, let’s walk around. He seizes eagerly at the idea.

And we run back into the street. The stores are still lit up and unfamiliar, dull adults are passing by with hasty nervous steps. Yuvush skips from paving stone to paving stone and I slow down, wondering for a moment if I wouldn’t rather be in bed, reading, sleeping, dreaming.

Shall we go into the park? he asks, skipping at my side, tugging his pants out of the cleft in his buttocks, and we turn to the left, to a dark and twisting street ending in a little park, with a thick-branched eucalyptus tree, pine trees, swings, little ladders and slides. They are a uniform black at night, and surrounding them are broken benches, reserved for irritable mothers, child-carers who keep glancing at their watches and tired passers-by.

We sit down on one of them, Yuvush tells me enthusiastically that his soldier brother has been accepted into a crack unit. His masculinity is bolstered by his description of his brother’s sterling qualities, and I listen fascinated, pondering the next moves, and what exactly I’m feeling, and what possessed me to say that I didn’t feel like going to bed, and to open a box which either Pandora or Fortune had played with before me.
Is that what I really thought on that evening of independent, primal, innocent, promising life?

A sense of adventure grows between us, an experience which has not yet begun and is already seeking to exhaust itself. Tension in the air, no hesitation, just the overwrought alertness of pre-discovery, no circuital thoughts, chasing their own tails, wondering at themselves. Sitting beside him, giggling, het-up, enamored of our bespectacled, inaccessible, exalted literature teacher, whose stories have been published in literary journals, I observe with curiosity Yuvish’s attempts to come closer. An accidental shift towards me on the bench, the movements of his body as he talks to me, the random stammer accompanying his speech, likeable, funny, pathetic.

Come on, get on with it, I encourage him silently. What are they so scared of, the worst that can happen is that I’ll say no. You’re scared too, eager-scared, scared-eager, what a sceager.

What will he think of me if I let him kiss me? What will he think if I let him touch me? Mustn’t, mustn’t. *Come to the swings,* I say to him. I have this driving urge to climb on, fly high.

*Yalla!* he concurs enthusiastically. What have I rescued him from? We run to the wooden swings, still capable of fitting our behinds into the small seats, legs on the ground, feet as far back as possible, up on tiptoes and – take off.

Back and forth, body inclined, back and forth, back and forth, I soar up high and shout out. Yuvush soars beside me, singing. Unintentionally, the swings move in harmony, equal rhythm, both of us backward, both of us forward, until he is above me, each time with terrifying impetus, and I remain at the same height, below him.

*Be careful, you might overturn,* I shout at him, and he laughs.

*How do you do it? I want to as well!*

Yuvush halts the swing all at once, jumps off, is thrown forward and then comes to stand behind me, pushing me energetically,
once, twice, until I am lifted up to the night sky. Air and freedom fill my lungs, and only when my head is level with the upper horizontal bar and the ground beneath me is as black and dense as if I were a bird, do I shout: *Enough! Stop!*

*What are you scared of?*

*Help, enough!*

He seized the seat, leans on it with all his weight, is dragged along a little until it comes to a halt.

Breathing hard we face one another. He is smiling and sweating. Without planning, as if this particular time is the right moment, just before I fall, he holds out his arms and I move into them, his face towards me, my face towards him, and a sweet little kiss passes between hot mouths.

Yuvush looks at me and I look back at him. The expression of a faithful dog. Wordlessly we turn towards a bench and halt beside a pine tree. The ground is covered with pine cones. He leans towards my mouth again, my lips seek his, nerves quivering, counting, cataloging every touch, and he tries to insert his tongue. Saliva collects in the corners of the mouth and, unable to decide whether to be disgusted or join in, I turn my face aside.

So what, Dana? Were there a Dana beside the tree and another Dana above it even then? Yield, Dana, says Dana, you mustn’t Dana, says Dana. Oh, Dana, shame on you, Dana – or does the later memory which accompanies the earlier one parcel it out into petty calculations, marred by a miserly life?

Yuvush is ardent, excited. So, apparently, is Dana. The trunk of the pine tree supports my back. We exchange a lengthy kiss, become familiar with the wetness, examine where the nose fits. I can feel his hands moving from my hips to my shoulders, confident and slow, sliding across my blouse, touching the sides of my breasts, still not daring to hurry. Yuvush presses his length against me, his pelvis tight against my belly, pushing my hips
against the tree, and currents of anticipation clash within me, warnings of primeval dangers. Generations of women who guarded their chastity, whose sheets were scrutinized by strangers on their wedding night, at least according to the stories, call out to me behind my eyelids. Yuvush is panting, his gasps sound loud in the night, attesting to weakness: the weakness of the male who needs you.

For so low a price he falls at your feet.

Slain.

I hug Yuvush, Yuvush clutches the sides of my breasts, and our mouths meet as we are crushed together. I no longer know if his tongue is in me or my tongue in him, hesitant, seeking, investigating hard, soft, wet places. My hands dig into his back and his hands crawl over my blouse to encompass my breasts. We kiss, separate, kiss, and a kind of quiver goes through him as his pelvis presses against me, presses, and, in an instant decision, I release myself.

We stand facing one another, still panting, a little embarrassed, fully-dressed in wrinkled clothes.

_It’s late, _I whisper, _we have to go back._

Yuvush nods. We walk out of the park into the street, the street lamps highlighting his somewhat bewildered expression, a kind of hesitant, shy satisfaction, and only in his blue bed, many years later, will I understand what it signified. But then, confused by the conflicting inner voices, the hormone-rich blood and the detached brain ordaining: Enough! I ask-declare: _Do you also like the swings?_

Still panting, he ponders for a moment, as if I’m hinting at other things, and finally smiles knowledgeably: _We must have been deprived when we were small. You know how it is, a Polish household._

In the thick, kind darkness he tells me about his quarrelsome parents, his father the milkman who works at night, his mother, his brothers. At the entrance to my building, when the yielding, dog-like, lingering glance is fixed on me again, and he bends his
head towards me in the instant before a kiss, I turn my face away rapidly and flee indoors, throwing him a ‘good night’.

From my room, peeping down into the street, I see him waiting, his face lifted, and a nagging discomfort begins to seek answers: how can we meet in school tomorrow, how will we look at one another, what will we say, how can we hide it? A first narrow track which will blaze a wider trail some day; this is how the blood pounds in the veins and guides actions, without prior expectations, without deliberate intent, without awareness? All that’s needed is nighttime, mild affection and a male and a female? Watching him clandestinely, without moving the curtain or switching on the light, I don’t know what I want – for him to go, to come up, to disappear, to come in. And when he lowers his head and begins to walk away, disappointment and relief well up in me.

That first time, at my house, still emotional, clinging passionately, the scent of forgotten neediness filling us, there was already a faint, fleeting flavor of disappointment, still undecided as to whether to hold fast or to dissolve.

Yuval works by the book, kisses, moves on to caresses, begins at the outlying sections and reaches the center. Everything is good and nothing is wonderful, only the innovation, the otherness, the shock of rediscovery making the blood race. He fondles me like the Bedrock, is just as considerate. If if wasn’t for the fact that he grasps me suddenly, flipping us over, sometimes raising me above him, other times the opposite, twice at least at each session, I could mistake him and whisper as I do after ten years of marriage – Yoram, now.

That was good, I say quietly when he gets up, arranging his bent and softening cock in his underpants.

Yuval dresses slowly, lifting garment after garment from the pile, in reverse order to his undressing, First the pants, then the undershirt, the shirt, and the pile on the floor shrinks. My clothes
are left lying naked, and I am reluctant to get up. Hunger flows through me and does not ease up.

*Do you want coffee?* I ask.

Yuval nods, and I am obliged to emerge from the nest of the warm, disheveled bed, slip on the house robe and slippers, swiftly pick up my clothes and put them on the bunched-up blanket, observe the arena we were in only a few minutes ago, on heat, fighting, clutching, caressing.

How pathetic.

Seated on high stools at the bar, hands around the giant brown and white cups, slices of lemon meringue arranged symmetrically on a delicate porcelain plate, our best china brought out in his honor.

*Interesting*, I wonder aloud, *if we had met by chance, two strangers, would it have turned into an affair?*

*I thought about that tonight*, he replies, and I am happy to imagine him with Tamar, lying in their double bed, side by side, a married couple, and his thoughts are going out to me. It doesn’t matter what he replies, or how much he pleasures me, a feeling of achievement tinged with sin floods me, appeasing the hunger.

*And what’s the conclusion?*

*I don’t know, the fact that we’re doing what we didn’t do when we were young doesn’t contradict what we’re feeling now.*

Logic.

*You’re warm and soft*, says Dr. Yuval Carmi, Tamar’s husband, snuggled beside me in their blue bed beneath the large mirror, *so womanly*. Turning towards one another, calmly, like a married couple, knowing what to expect. I stroke his back, he caresses my behind, our chests are pressed together, my breasts, full but already soft, are squashed against his chest. I absorb the compliment, still don’t know if I’m comfortable with it. So that’s what he seeks in me, warmth and softness?
You’re a cold person, Yoram grumbles over a plate of sushi, as we celebrate his forty somethingth birthday, who can remember, in a restaurant in the port area whose name has slipped my mind, telling me in detail about a colleague at work who is divorcing, about a misunderstanding between them which is evolving into a conflict.

Don’t give in, I interrupt him. He won’t give you credit. Don’t let him exploit you.

You’re a cold person, he looks at me angrily, I’ve never heard you say a good word about anyone.

Do you want me to pretend? I say defensively.

It’s not only that, he goes on, you do it with me as well. I can never really tell you something. You always manage to stab at me.

You can’t tell me??! I protest. When did you really tell me truly. Even with Berta…

Let’s stop this, he checks me dryly, spearing the sushi, not now. There’s no point. I am stunned. How come his mouth is uttering my thoughts? How come the feelings of alienation and loneliness swirling in me are alive in him as well?

Raising my glass of white wine to him, wishing him long life, even smiling, I can feel that anger seething: What right has he to talk! In the strained years of fertility treatment, the birth trauma, he was always disappearing when he was needed, vanishing into his own world, present as chauffeur, functioning as sperm donor, always a bedrock, never a shoulder. Just when I began to find solutions of my own, trying to feel at ease with the duality of my life: with myself and with him, with my thoughts and as his wife, internally and outwardly, different when together, different when alone, and finally there was Yuvush as well, an experimental drug for a full life, all my own – now, of all times, is it his turn to grumble? Is it possible that the malignant solitude which I learned to suppress is budding in him as well, nurtured by me? I am
confused: by what right?

Multi-tentacled incomprehension has metastised inside me, stealing the poor man’s ewe lamb. He doesn’t even permit me to feel miserable.

*We need to talk*, I sum up courageously.

*That’s what you have to say*, he answers quietly, as if to himself. *That’s what you know. ‘We need to talk’. but nothing ever comes of it. It’s easy to talk, difficult to act.*

*Yoram should hear you*, I say, stroking Yuval’s thigh, twisting the hairs. *He sees me quite differently.*

*Isn’t Tamar warm?* I continue when he says nothing. *Of course she is too*, he defends himself. *Let’s not talk so much, time is running out.*

Indeed, it’s twelve twenty, and I place a hand on his bent cock, small and delicate in my hand, swelling rapidly, knowing that when he penetrates it will press and arouse me a little more than a normal cock, but after a minute or two, enveloped in wetness, its unique roughness will vanish and, like all the others, it won’t be felt. Awaiting his beautiful fingers conducting their regular examination, I ponder how lovemaking lost its charm when it became just sex.

The piston-like touch of organ in organ, a brush in a tube, what more? A little oiling, local heat, cell-swelling accumulation, focusing nerves, heightening up to the strong spasm, relaxing in stages.

Did something happen?

So different from the implied, anticipating ardor, crying out for detail, the imagination feeding on itself. It intensifies in myriad nerves of apprehension and discovery, erupting, fleeing, gripping with a spasm of pleasure and pain, trying to discover what lies beyond, believing that there is still something there beyond - *You’re warm and soft*, says Yuval, judging my body close to
his, my smile which costs nothing, reflected in his eyes as truth, what does he know of my revulsion from his cock, the calculations and reckonings inside my head, my memories, where even if he is there as a fleeting guest, he will serve for comparison not as a cornerstone.

In Tamar’s bed, Yuval’s erection hardens and he enters rapidly, exits, rolls on a condom and returns to a home, which is not his, to a woman who is not his. Turned on by the sensation of change but indifferent to his body, I am not yet wet and the dry friction is painful.

*The condom is unnecessary,* I try, *there’s no chance that I’ll get pregnant.*

*There’s a risk even if there’s no chance,* he insists.

*Do you have a lubricant?* I seek a solution from a different direction.

*Perhaps you need hormones?* The doctor in Yuval queries, judging the body, never imagining that the spirit is indifferent.

*What about butter…like the Last Tango in Paris?* I continue. The memory of Marlon Brando’s aging body, weary, lacking vitality, twined around the young body of a strange girl, suddenly evokes anticipation and dampens the membranes.

Yuval tries to get up and I stop him.

*Not necessary, it’s OK.* He resumes his movements with a light sigh while I help, moving my pelvis in harmony, awaiting the moment when he turns me over, sliding hands with sharp nails over his back, careful to avoid overdoing it so that no marks will be left, and while I concentrate on his movements I try to recall scenes from the old movie.

The sounds Yuval makes as he comes are guttural and fragmentary like cries of pain, freeing me of his weight, leaving me with hunger and envy.

*You didn’t come?* he asks-declares.
I wasn’t concentrating. I am being sincere for a change.
I don’t like having to hurry you, but if I’m going to take you back to town, we need to get going so that we’ll have time for coffee.

Leaving with a blank expression for fear of the neighbor, clutching the briefcase and old newspapers he’s given me as camouflage, I enter his car. Scrutinizing his handsome profile, wondering how come fate has allotted me only good-looking men, each in his own way, I sense that now, if we were to go back, reenter the house and invade the bed, I would be charged with earth-shaking emotions.

We didn’t use the mirror, I tell him.
Aha, he confirms.
I don’t know what went wrong today.
Perhaps we were under a strain, he suggests.
Let’s leave our homes out of the picture, neither mine nor yours.
You’re probably right, he confirms again as he drives out of his neighborhood onto the main road, darting glances in the mirror every minute in search of familiar vehicles.

Now, I tell him, I’m ravenous.
You’ll soon be home.
No, ravenous for you, I explain and see his face change. I’d do it again.

A soft smile erases the sobriety and authority imposed on him by years like a mask, and he looks at me proudly. But we don’t have time, he responds gently, apologetically.

I know. My voice reaches me slow, coy. It echoes disappointed inside me, though I don’t admit it.

The fool believes me! Something, perhaps I might call it sadness, perhaps shame, takes up residence in me but is forgotten rapidly when I part from him outside the local supermarket.

Yuval drives off to pick up his children from kindergarten or
school, and what do I do? Buy soya fritters, fresh rinsed vegetables, frozen peas, cabbage. I fill the three-level steamer with a layer of rice, a second layer of peas and, prepare the anemic vitamin-rich lunch I vowed to myself to prepare at least once a week while Yoram was abroad. Cabernet Sauvignon fills half a tall glass tumbler meant for juice, gleaming faintly as it moves.

_Lehayim_, I smile at the man in the moon, the man in the bed, the man in the man. You’re all the same. I’ve slept with one. I know you all.

And I eat with great gusto.

I have no children. So what? In any case I wouldn’t have known how to equip them with the skills needed for obstacle-free, self-confident existence. Girls in particular. Like… – but why remember? I have none and will never have.

And if I’d given birth to boys, wouldn’t I be like Dorit? Checking their beds in the morning to see if they returned last night with every limb intact, the nightmarish wait for the deputation of evil messengers during their army service. What for? Something good comes of everything bad, says Grandma Knows Best, and, in her own way, she really knows best. The nights are filled with anxiety for myself alone, my partner, my home. A fresh flower arrangement every Thursday, not cheap but worth it, adding elegant intimacy to the leather couches, echoing the patches of color in the Nubian rug. Two theater premieres per month on our subscription tickets. Twice a year joining the Bedrock on his overseas trips, free and light as a butterfly.

Collecting diplomas. A diploma in art evaluation, first level, a tourist guide course, I even started studying alternative medicine and very soon stopped. Recently I’ve been contemplating registering for a course for overseas tour guides. If I framed diplomas, the entrance hall wall would disappear behind them. A BA and MA in history of Eretz Israel, a BA in general history, an
additional BA in art history which I completed after abandoning my doctorate.

Dana, Yoram once said, *the fact that your name stars in the first school primer doesn’t mean that you mustn’t graduate* – and I laughed.

Remember the Russian proverb – If the idiot wasn’t mine, I’d laugh too.

After the first time at my house, seated on the high bar stools gripping a mug, Yuval gazes at me and smiles. Two inroads into his curly hair extend his forehead, lending a serious appearance to his straight nose, narrowing his eyes, eradicating the boy Yuvush in the man with graying sideburns.

*Where did you disappear to?* I ask. *You weren’t with us in the eleventh grade.*

*We moved to a kibbutz. I wrote to you.*

*I never received it,* I hasten to give him the same reply as a month ago in the hospital. *When?*

*Remember the night on the swings?* He smiles. *I sent you a poem.*

*If you’d replied I might be a poet now.*

*It’s never too late,* I laugh.

A yellow sheet of paper and short lines float vaguely in my memory. ‘To my Dana’ scribbled at the top with a giant exclamation mark, no, three, and a heart in place of a period. Three hearts side by side, colored red, childish, irritating a girl who thinks she’s a woman, who decides to ignore the sender and the hearts. What have I to do with them or with him.

*I was so randy, unbelievable,* Yuval goes on, and after a pause, *and shy too.*

*We’re making up for it now, it’s never too late,* I conclude, resorting to clichés, sitting in my kitchen, hungry body in a bathrobe, noticing an egg-yolk stain on the sleeve and hastily folding it over, and deciding to get dressed.

*The blouse,* I recall suddenly, looking at him, *the one I was*
wearing. Remember how we were leaning against the pine tree when we were hugging? The resin stuck and didn’t come off in the wash. I threw it away so that Imma wouldn’t notice.

What do you know, he burst out laughing at his memories. I came in my pants from sheer excitement, just from the hugging. I didn’t go to school next day, I was so ashamed.

I didn’t even notice, I say, amazed.

I wanted to bury myself, he says, looking at me in surprise, how come I remembered suddenly? Smiling, he holds out a hand, pinches-caresses the flesh between my neck and my shoulder. Now it’s all accessible. No problems.

Yes, no, I must be precise. I miss that excitement. I’d like to feel it again.

What an idea! No way!

I won’t take a sleeping pill tonight. As we walk towards the bed, Vicky supports my back, slow, small steps. As long as I can, I’ll walk. From bed to armchair, from armchair to bed, a short-vast distance. Each floor tile a sidewalk of effort. Right foot, pink slipper, velvety acrylic, left foot the same, despatched forward one after the other. The friction of the hip joint reaches my ears, as dull as the cracking of finger joints.

Vicky is close by me on my right side, a different smell, taut skin, smooth hair clipped with a golden bird pin. Step by step and halfway there is the bathroom. We were created with offices and cavities, says the benediction, and just as we nurture the higher ones, we must look after the lower ones. Vicky squeezes the toothpaste tube, one striped centimeter onto the bristles of my brush, and I rub it over my teeth. Saliva and mint mingle between tongue and lips and then she hands me the water for rinsing. Vicky is efficient. Vicky is experienced. There is nobody like Vicky in times of trouble. Anticipating my moves, she forestalls them, each time in a split second. Soon I’ll wash my face then dry it. Cupping
water in her hands, she wets my face, drips liquid soap into my palm, and when I pass a hand over my face from cheek to eyes, from forehead to neck, soap, collect water and spray it, her hand too touches, sprays and rinses wherever the soap clings. And now she’s already drying me with soft gentle touches. Vicky has a soft hand tonight; sometimes it’s heavy but this time delicate. And now we’re in the toilet. I sit and she is at the open door, waiting for the tinkling to end, and already pressing the flushing handle and the burst of water wets my body, which did not have time to stand up, with indifferent, cold drops.

_Why you hurry?_ I say angrily and she mumbles something, and again we march, as if in an embrace, into the bedroom. I sink onto the bed with a sigh of relief and she lifts my legs with her left hand, supports my back with her right hand, and when she raises my legs to the center of the mattress, she settles—drops them straight down, and my back sinks back onto the high pillows.

Another day gone by.
Chapter 15: A Boiling-Hot Bath

Yellow light in my room. The dim ceiling lights are reinforced by a reading lamp, and the two women embracing on the opposite wall are faceless, only a cheek against a profile, neck inclined towards neck with stem-like delicacy, shoulders and hands indistinct. Are they hugging each other or themselves? I have forgotten where I found the picture, or who gave it to me, where from, but their yearning movements and the blurring of the borders between them resound in me, even now, with an inexplicable tenderness.

Dorit has loaded down her apartment with photographs of her children. It is three years since Itzik joined the photographs, as the result of a car crash. Above the marital bed in an elaborate silver frame he smiles at her, eternally cheerful, unconcerned by the worms consuming his flesh.

Do you talk to him? I ask her, as we lie on her wide bed, with our feet up, in our childhood position.

Sometimes, a bashful smile fleets over her face, I tell him about the children.

And he always understands, does he?
What is it you want?
You’re talking to yourself, you know.
And you’re inventing the wheel.

You interpret the silence anyway you like, I persist. In real life, when they’re silent, it’s just that, silence. It’s not a case of understanding or insensitivity, particularly now. He’s dead, Dorit. That’s it. Stop. The strings aren’t moving, there’s no air.

Don’t impose your lousy ideas on me, Dorit sits bold upright in anger. I swear, you’re unbearable. I know I’m talking to myself and not to him, you don’t have to tell me. You think I don’t know? But I talk
for my sake, and that's good. You can talk too, she adds maliciously; deliver a speech to Yehoyada’s picture.

After they're dead, I’m not willing to concede to her or to myself, they suddenly become precious, suddenly they’re capable of understanding.

What’s there to understand, she gives me a penetrating look, and who are these ‘they’? Itzik isn’t they. Itzik is my husband, the father of the children. Yoram isn’t ‘they’ either. I really can’t stand your whining, you whine more as the years go by. Maybe, she looks at me and I can see how anger is being replaced by pity, just for once you could say what you want, what’s really bothering you.

What do you mean?
Define what it is they don’t understand, what’s bothering you.
I stare at her, offended.
You are, I say, get up and go into the living room.

When I was trying to get pregnant, I avoided wine. No alcohol, no drugs, no cigarettes, still believing that everything would work out OK. Even when it transpired that surgical intervention was required, I was still optimistic. Yoram cooperates in his own way, drives me to the outpatient clinic, and supplies semen at planned intervals. Why do you need a child, he says as we sit in the cafeteria after the fourth unsuccessful attempt, my eyes red. Try to overcome the atavism. So you’ll depart the world without leaving an heir, so what, what’s so terrible about that?

I want a child, I repeat a mantra, everybody has one, call it whatever you like.

That’s precisely what atavism is, an instinctive uncontrollable need. Snap out of it!

It’s easy for you to talk; your child is growing up without you.

Child? he says sorrowfully. It would be better if he didn’t exist.
No, really, what do you get out of children?
Dr. Granovitzky’s office is located in a corner house in north Tel Aviv. Uri received the name and address from a friend - *I was in the same jam a year ago. He’s elderly but his hands don’t shake.*

*Are you scared?* he asks me as we enter.

Melancholy twilight. If we continued walking westward we would see the vast red circle of the sun dipping into the sea. Scared? Me? Of what?

The need to put into his mouth words he never said, that he was incapable of saying. Has the distance of years transformed my men into a single personality, sensitive-indifferent, or am I recreating them according to my own standards – frozen, flat, sometimes tender, and shaped in the Procrustean bed of my images. Uri doesn’t ask if I’m scared. Uri is too preoccupied to consider what I might be thinking. I walk hastily behind him, two of my steps matched with one of his. His whole body is in rapid, jerky rhythm. The way in which his neck muscles work, the hand stretched out to press the bell, his frown raising two cute vertical lines wrinkling his nose.

If I were to see you now, Uri, would I recognize you?

Am I scared? I have to answer the unasked question. Fear is not a word in my private dictionary, shame perhaps. *I’m ashamed,* I reply when he rings the bell, and in the interval between the dying of the ring and the sound of approaching footsteps I promise myself again that in the three weeks since I realized I was pregnant, I have had enough time to be shocked, hope, be disappointed and take a firm decision which I do not regret, most certainly do not regret, even now.

A lean man, spectacles drooping on his nose, opens the door. *I made an appointment,* says Uri.

*Please come in,* he moves aside. A suit which has seen better days hangs on a wizened body, summoning us to enter what appears, at a rapid glance, to be a waiting room: two square meters
of whitewashed walls, a wilting pot plant, five chairs leaning against the wall. He closes the door behind us, and leads us ahead of him into another room the like of which I will learn to know intimately, sometimes with hope, mostly with pain: a desk, two chairs with their backs to us await us and behind them a comfortable chair faces us, awaiting the doctor. A half-open curtain reveals a bed, which has been shortened and has two stirrups attached.

A delivery room for the woman in the girl.

*Please sit down.* He locks the doors and hurriedly settles himself in his chair, flipping through papers, then lifts his gaze to Uri, *Aah...Mr. and Mrs. Dotan, how can I help you?*

*My wife is pregnant,* says Uri, *and we're still students.*

*Congratulations,* smiles Dr. Granovitzky, *children are a blessing.*

*Not for me,* I say.

*Not just yet,* Uri softens the aggressive tone in which I uttered the three words. *Our parents are still supporting us, we live in a rented apartment, can't afford a baby now.* The lies tumble out lightly.

*In another year or two,* I add generously.

*They always say a year or two,* Dr. Granovitzky confirms, waiting. He won’t utter the word unless we say it first. I stare at him with hostility. How many stories has he already heard with that same understanding feline smile, how many of them helped finance his second-floor apartment, his grandson’s studies in Italy?

*We’ve come for an abortion,* Uri sums up, his knees jerking nervously, seemingly detached from his torso, which is steady above the desk.

*Abortion?* he repeats, and for an instant I am apprehensive. Perhaps we mistook the address and Uri’s information is imprecise. *There are hospital committees, why don’t you apply there?*

*I don’t want committees,* I burst out.

*We don’t have time,* says Uri, *it’s the tenth week.*

*Let’s examine you first,* he smiles with weird slowness, which
begins at the right corner of his mouth, moves to the center and finally to the eyes. *On there, please*, he says, pointing to the bed, stands up and pulls aside the curtain and then closes it with a single movement.

Uri remains on the other side.

Dana is alone, Dana is a cow. Dana lies with legs spread on a bed manufactured especially for women. How would men design an instrument for women if not according to their view of women? Decoration for an orifice. Legs apart, each foot in a stirrup, held unmoving. The lower parts gaping open, the head and chest above, insignificant, superfluous. Dr. Granovitzky sits between my legs, adapts his swivel chair to the appropriate height.

*I'm not doing anything*, he says, *just examining*.

A cold invasive instrument is caught in the vagina, expanding the opening.

*Relax*, he says, one hand stroking my belly. *Loosen up your muscles*.

The hand doesn’t remind me of Yehoyada, not at all. The age marks are disgusting, assymetrical brown on yellow skin. His neck as well: three reddish folds hanging down from the chin. The fragrance of expensive after-shave, neither sweet nor sharp, reaches my nostrils.

His other hand, in a nylon glove, penetrates.

*Relax; I'm not doing anything*.

How does one loosen up? I gaze at the curtain: white; the ceiling: white.

What is he rummaging for? I try to distance myself from his movements, from my body, from the lower part lying spread open and accessible.

*Finished*. He stands up. *You can get dressed*, and he is already on the other side of the curtain, and as I put on my panties I hear him saying to Uri

*The pregnancy hasn't reached the tenth week. Why don't you think*
again?

There’s nothing to think about, Uri replies. We’ve done our thinking.

I don’t work at home, the doctor continues as I return to my chair, only in hospital. That means a great deal of money, for the anesthetist, for the room.

He doesn’t mention himself, I think.

I know, says Uri and they fix a date together, three days’ time.

Don’t eat, don’t drink that morning, he says, turning to me. Come on an empty stomach.

And before we leave, he catches Uri by the sleeve. Next time, he winks, I have some advice for you, how to avoid pregnancy.

We turn to him hastily, waiting:

A couple come to the doctor, like you, to ask for an effective prescription against pregnancy. No problem, says the doctor to the man. Each time take a half a glass of club soda and add a third of a glass of lemonade. Be careful about the quantities.

Is that all, the man says, wonderful. And what shall I do with it?

Drink it, says the doctor.

Wonderful, says the man. When, before or after?

No, says the doctor, instead of. Granovitzky chokes with laughter.

We join in the laughter, leave with a smile, but on the paved path leading from the building to the street, in the deepening evening, I ask Uri: Did you know it would cost so much? Three months’ salary. Where will we get it?

Half and half, he tells me.

How, I am alarmed. I don’t know where to get it.

It’s your responsibility as well, he says. I was careful but it still happened. I don’t know how. You’re in it with me, just like me.

We are all little foxes, spoiling the vines.

Yoram tells me about his son the evening we decide to get
married. We are walking down a street in north Tel Aviv, turning right into Gordon Street to sit in a café. He clears his throat. *Let’s find somewhere quiet. I want to discuss the future with you, if you agree.*

*Wow,* I want to shout but remain silent.

Despite his inarticulateness, I understand. Twenty-five years of spinsterhood are about to end. Five, too many. What are you worth when you’re over twenty and still unmarried? The world is full of couples, like Noah’s Ark, and unmarried women are expected to turn into Miss Havisham: withered, bitter, consumed with frustration. Not like today’s females, free as the birds, shitting in every corner.

Why lie? Even then there were some who were light of movement, firm-footed, traveled the world, lived in rented apartments and occasionally became pregnant and decided to carry on. The aroma of ‘Make love not war’, already obsolete in the rest of the world, arrived here, tattered but still lively and brilliantly colored. But as for me, I’m still a good little girl from a respectable family, attending the university, working for my living, avoiding contact with Yehoyada, taking care not to regret Uri, hating discotheques, enjoying folk dancing, coming home to the parental apartment, refusing to see the question in their eyes, closing my door.

Behind the door I am light of movement, fleet-footed. Carrying a backpack crammed with maps, ropes and canned provisions, I roam the South American forests, the Icelandic glaciers. On one occasion, I tumble down Niagara Falls in a well-sealed wooden barrel. No, why down? I soar in a hot-air balloon over the rain forests, noting the tall trees being cut down to supply paper, so much paper.

Yoram is scrupulous about accompanying me home, coming up to the apartment, saying ‘Shalom’ and ‘Good night’ as he leaves,
and ‘How are you today?’ as he arrives.

When he sits on a chair, his muscles are not tensed. His ass fills the seat, firm, round, attractive. His hands are on the table, a square gold signet ring with a black stone on his ring finger. He is apparently unaware of it but my eyes are drawn to it, magnetized, unable to decide.

So that’s it? Planning the future?

It is clear to me a priori that this time planning means decision, implementation. No more words, with their splinters and meanings, the emotion behind them, beside them, instead of them. This time the words are concrete, rocks, concrete in rock, filling every crack or crater.

Let’s go back to Café Vered, I say, so that we can keep on walking, absorb the moment, the tranquility of coupledom. Like our first date, I smile, remember? We sat upstairs?

Yoram nods.

I’ve thought a great deal, he says, and my eyes are on the store windows but my ears are pricked up. There are several things you need to know and we haven’t discussed them.

You’ve been in jail? I try not to ask the obvious. You have a million dollars stashed away in Luxembourg?

He doesn’t laugh: I have a child.

So that’s it. However you proceed, you fall. Those grimy little creatures. Wherever you go, they are already there.

Where there’s a child there’s a mother.

True.

He says it’s true! True, he says. He could have said ‘there was’ as if it’s no longer relevant. He could have shrugged a shoulder, said ‘no longer’ or ‘that’s not the important issue’ or ‘as far as I’m concerned, she doesn’t exist’ but he said ‘true’.

I am struck dumb for a moment. What should I ask – Who? When? Where? How? Every reply is a stone, if I don’t ask, it won’t fall.
He’s two years old.

We have reached the pedestrian crossing, facing the boulevard. Not far from here, more than a year ago, I walked along a street with a child inside me.

Be careful, he grasps me, you’re crossing on red.

A woman in a straw hat is flirting with the seller in the kiosk, drinking juice from a bottle. The artificial sweetness fills my mouth as well.

She’s living abroad, he continues, and for some reason I can breathe again.

Café Vered isn’t there. Wooden and steel scaffolding around the structure proclaims the advent of another bank branch or real estate office.

Everything flows, I say, and Yoram turns round to me. In any case, we did our talking on the way here. There’s no need to go looking, we can sit down in the first place that appeals to us.

He didn’t say ‘the first place we find’ but ‘the first that appeals to us’. Within the ‘panta rhei’, we have the right to choose, not everything is lost. There is sincerity, partnership, and openness. There is a future.

What’s the story, I ask, seemingly indifferent, over a cappuccino and an almond pastry, slicing it with a little silver fork.

There’s no story. I was young, we weren’t careful.

So what, there’s always abortion.

She didn’t want one.

Religious?

No.

She wanted to tie you down?

No, in any case I was crazy about her.

So what’s the story? I don’t understand.

A fantastic Yemenite girl, really stunning, he goes on, but there’s no film of memory, no longing in his eyes. A dancer’s body.
Dancers have small breasts.
Not her, and this time the trace of a smile creates dimples on both sides of his mouth.
So what’s going on? You’re not free?
Why are you getting excited? He takes out a cigarette, lights it with skilled unconscious movements. I told you she’s out of the country. And we didn’t tie the knot.
But there’s a child.
Why won’t you let me tell you the story from the beginning? He smiles again, and the dimple deepens.
OK, OK.

Yoram talks, and I dig into the pastry with the quasi-silver fork.
The child is in an institution and Naama is in the States, he says. I’m telling you in advance, because it’s important for you to know everything about me before you decide. I didn’t want the information to hit you before you’re ready.
Another love story, proving afresh the inadequacy of words that seek to revive what is dead.
They met in his final year in the regular army, a liaison officer doing an office job after his physical profile rating was reduced. Naama was working at a military camp near Tel Aviv, commuting every day from her border moshav. It was no simple matter for her to join the army, the only girl in her family to do so, he tells me and the note of pride in his voice arouses my sympathy: he is capable of empathizing, of understanding difficulties. To the same extent he’ll be capable of understanding me, and I listen, forgetting to chew. Her sisters all declared that they were strictly religious and gained exemption from military service, but she insisted. In the end, as a compromise, she decided to volunteer for civilian national service. Her parents naturally didn’t support her but at least they didn’t stand in her way.
I met them, he says after a brief contemplative silence, sipping
his coffee. *Good people. Her mother still wore the traditional Yemenite clothes, a skirt over embroidered pants.*

Yoram enjoys telling the story. He leans forward, talks quietly as if he’s already told it many times before. Each of us has his stories: gathered in, spread wide, fans of words. When will he reach the core, or perhaps he too is concealing secrets, buried deep in concrete foundations, beneath feather-light sentences?

*We didn’t consider marriage.* He looks at me. *But to tell you the truth I was serious.*

*Do you have a picture of her?*

*Yes, if you like.*

*Naama loved dancing. In that too, she was different from her sisters. They all married very young. One of them married an Ashkenazi,* he smiles, *from a German family. If you like, we could meet.*

*Are you in contact with them?*

*Why not? I like him.* He looks at me, awaiting the words I won’t utter.

*So why didn’t you marry?*

*We did.*

*But you said…*

*Not a religious ceremony. We did it in Cyprus at a mayor’s office. It’s like any other marriage, just as valid…*

*Yes, but we didn’t register the marriage here in Israel. Meanwhile the child was born and we decided not to stay together. There’s no official record.*

*That makes no difference,* I say. *Not that I understand your story, but you’re married, and official records don’t matter to me.*

*That’s not what’s important; you’re deviating from the main issue. Married or not, I have no problem with that. If that’s considered married, then I can get a divorce. What’s important is the child.*

*Not to me.* I want to say but remain silent. There you are, each individual and his stories. So what, if you tell them in detail,
does that make them less problematic? Every story has a story, and
beneath it another story, and another story, super-story and nether-
story, a cock-and-bull story but none of those words is uttered,
because again self-pity floods me, and I take a hard look inward…
You thought this was it, over, you’d found the bedrock on which to
build a full life. You should have realized long ago that there are no
miracles, only cracks.

Where is she now?
In the States, I told you. Professional dancer.
And the child is with her?
No. I told you, she’s not important. What’s important is the child.
And in fact he’s not important either. Suddenly he falls silent and
looks at me, and I know that now the real story will commence,
the one beneath the story, which is beneath the story, and I want to
ward it off.

Why isn’t it important? They’re both important.
Sure, he smiles patiently, but let me tell you the main thing. I
don’t know why it’s so difficult for me. The child is in an institution.
He’s paralyzed and retarded. And now he takes a deep breath and
looks at me, and I pay the monthly fees.

The load has slipped off his shoulders and now I have it.

Have you ever noticed, Dana, how utterance is liberating? The
unsaid flounders inside, between the throat and the diaphragm,
banging against the skin like a stone hurled at a rubber wall,
repulsed and repulsed again. Each time the impact leaves a mark,
wider, redder, flattening till it cracks.

What is unsaid has not yet turned into words, sometimes
it’s only the beginning of sensation, the beginning of beginning,
sometimes it is unadulterated, crystallized pain. The words have
not yet settled into orderly lines. They are still spinning dizzily like
photons around the atom nucleus, retreating and magnetized, free
and chained, spinning around in a closed circle.
Like now. A choking sensation at the base of the throat. At times I thought it was weeping, sometimes coughing, a fetal sensation with no way of knowing into what it will translate.

Yes, there is! – Into nausea.

Dana my dear, what did you do in those first years of marriage when the words were eager to emerge, to construct the sentence beneath the sentence, and you were silent?

*If you didn’t tell him before about Yehoyada or the abortion, how can you tell him now?* says Dorit. *What one doesn’t know doesn’t hurt,* and other clever remarks, all entirely true.

You see, he has a paralyzed, retarded child, accessorized with an institution. Now that he’s told me, so do I.

I never went to the institution to see the child, although I wanted to.

*Let’s go,* I said to Yoram over the pastry crumbs on that lingering afternoon, which refused to end. *How long haven’t you seen him?*

*Almost two years.*

*And don’t you want to?*

*What for? He doesn’t recognize anyone, doesn’t understand, a pity to suffer for that.*

*It would be for you! If you’re talking about suffering, it’s a sign you’re thinking about him, and I…*

*How can I not think? But there’s no point to going, it’s a special institution for severely damaged children.*

*I want to see him,* I insist, and as the words emerge they sound false: what do I have to do with him, poor child who’s not a child, a creature lying limply with other such creatures in a forgotten room, neither alive nor dead, neither human nor animal, a body fed and raised till it dies and everyone breathes a sigh of relief?

Do I really want to take a trip to the south, to look for an address that probably bears the name of a flower, Poppy or
Narcissus Street or a tree, Oak or Cedar Street, where an old building is concealed behind a hedge and its room’s smell of urine and Lysol. No, I don’t really want to.

I don’t want you to see him, I don’t need you to see him, he has nothing to do with you. If Naama wants to that’s her affair, but not you. We’ll start a new life.

You know what, I say, not arguing for a change, you’re right.

At home I took a boiling-hot bath. My legs reddened and I immersed my pelvis mercilessly, allowing the furnace to lick all around, perhaps it would reach into the uterus and cause a natural miscarriage. Imma and Abba have gone to bed. What do they understand about sex? On rare occasions I hear urgent breathing from their room, only his, never hers, and I’ve learned to recognize the shamefaced, smiling glance he sends her in the evening, in order to mollify her as night approaches. They know nothing and never will. Just as I succeeded in keeping Yehoyada from them, they won’t ever know about the abortion I’m going to have on Tuesday, unless a miracle occurs and drops of blood appear on my panties that morning.

The room is filled with steam and my face is soaked in sweat. Apart from a strange feeling of fullness in the breasts, nothing in my body attests to what is going on inside. Pink nipples, flat belly, perhaps even more concave than usual. Is it possible that I’m mistaken, you’re mistaken, we’re mistaken?

What possessed Naama, a young girl with erect posture, swan neck, from a traditional family in a remote moshav, to refuse to undergo a religious marriage ceremony? What motivated her to carry through on that first pregnancy, unplanned and unwanted? What did she think in those early days of pregnancy when she saw her plans being shattered and the predictions and fears of her elderly father being fulfilled? How should I know, I, who with the
first morning sickness and suspicious delay, said to myself: Even if Uri asks me to, I’m not keeping this thing. I’ve got plenty of time to become a mother.

Uri didn’t ask. He was as panic-stricken as I was, but he shouldn’t have panicked. He should have said: My little Dana, we’ll have a baby, I’m so happy. Like a character in a book, no, like the man of one’s dreams, like the books in dreams. But Uri was silent for a long time, longer than usual, his eyes showing bafflement, perhaps anger, before he said:

I’m always careful. Perhaps you can explain how it happened?

What explanations can I provide? Shall I say: ‘You’re the only one’? I’m not some Hollywood heroine or a page in the ultimate dime novel. I’m Dana, a good girl from a respectable family, working for a living. No man is going to test my veracity.

Particularly since it is true.

I didn’t tell Yehoyada. I couldn’t. Our meetings were now sporadic, so were the telephone conversations. The longing – now infrequent, afflicting me suddenly – had already turned into nostalgia: longing for longing, which made it easier for me not to tell him about the pregnancy, the decision to abort, the widening gap between Uri and me. If he knows the truth perhaps he’ll make an effort to restore the situation between us to its previous intensity. If he knows the truth, he’s sure to be disappointed in me.

I cling to the first intuitive decision: this child, this thing, these cells, proliferating at a crazy pace, are not going to dictate my life. I’m the only one who can do that. And I learn to spell the letter X.

I must have fallen asleep. It’s still dark outside, and the small lamp in the bathroom is still emitting a dull yellow light. It’s hot and humid. The diaper between my legs is still dry but the skin of my thighs is sweating. No concessions. Another struggle that failed.

Be logical, urine leaks in your sleep. Why are you being stubborn. When you’re weak, all your muscles weaken. They give everyone a
diaper at night. It'll only be at night. You don’t need one during the day.

My ‘No, I won’t’ grows weaker as my strength fades.

They damaged my bladder during surgery, that’s for sure. In women it’s all in the same place, so when they remove something they damage all the rest, I repeat to Michal and she gives me a sympathetic smile.

I don’t know what infuriates me more: her disagreement or her smile.

It’s possible (she agrees, she agrees after all, but they always agree with you, why should they argue with you, a fleeting guest?). But what does it matter now, it’s more important that you don’t suffer unpleasantness.

It’s important to me. If they damaged my bladder, we should sue. I’m not going to wear a diaper.

No problem, whatever you want, she concludes.

But at night, sleeping in snatches, discovering weariness of a new kind, each time different, I awake wet. Vicky, I shout, and perhaps Imma, Imma? It’s very early, possibly three a.m. perhaps four, but too late, damp and warm. Vicky undresses me, changes the sheets, and when she rolls up the sheet I see a thick white nylon sheet on the air mattress, and defeat beats twofold at me. They’ve already put down what is necessary as if I were a baby. I have no right to free speech. When did I ever have?

Be logical, says Yoram on his weekly visit, two days later. Two consecutive nights of leakage. I know you’re a practical woman. It’s not a question of dignity. Do you want the house to smell?

Plain and direct. He’s right, puts everything straight onto the table. ‘I have a paralyzed retarded child in an institution’. So simple, a kick straight to the goal.

This time, not like then, when I was disconcerted but cooperating, I wish, wordlessly, only wordlessly, that he was in my position.
Naama’s child, if he’s still alive, must be what? Twenty? Twenty-two? A metaphorical child. If I had brothers they would probably keep me tied up, she told Yoram, her teeth gleaming in a smile. Luckily, I only have sisters and my father is old.

What does Naama think when she discovers she’s pregnant, when it hits her like an unforeseen curse and she doesn’t dare rid herself of it? Not to that extent, there’s a limit, she says to Yoram. But I don’t want a child now, it would destroy our plans.

What are those plans of ours, asks Yoram.

My plans, she replies, and I shake her hand across the years, put words in her mouth, and attach intentions to decisions when I know only what the outcome was.

We’ll get married in Cyprus, she says, then nobody here will know anything and the child will have a father, but after he’s born, I don’t know, I must dance.

You’ll dance, says the Bedrock, I promise. I’ll raise him.

How did Naama conceal her growing belly from the eyes of her family? In her sixth month a slightly flattened ball protrudes from her tight pants. Above it she wears an airy tunic. I have a room in town, she tells her parents. Her oldest sister helps. Naama is studying dancing, Naama is waitressing, let her stay in town. It’s accepted. Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill. I’ll look after her, no problem.

Naama stops dancing, stops working. I’ve decided to study for matriculation, not just dance, she informs her delighted parents. I don’t have time to visit.

Try to bear down only when we tell you to, the midwife repeats at the vital moment. As a dancer you have particularly strong muscles. Learn to relax.

It will go off well, says Naama, arriving at the hospital, terrified, with contractions three minutes apart but no dilation, Yoram at her side. She is swallowed up in the delivery room and
he wanders around the waiting room with three other men, all smoking nervously like expectant fathers in stories. At about four o’clock there is sudden frantic activity. Doctors come and go, nurses run. At six they come out to him: a young, weary doctor with a nurse at his side: the baby is in intensive care, Naama is recovering, everything went off well. Only two days later will they tell her, in the doctors’ office, that the head is too big, that the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck, that the combination of a large head and lack of oxygen does not augur well for normal development, and when the social worker visits her a day before she leaves hospital, Naama says: I’m not taking that baby and Yoram, sitting beside her, looks at her helplessly, perhaps angrily, and when he intends to argue, she says in a clear voice: You have no right to speak, you’re not the father.

And to the stunned social worker she says: He’s a good friend who’s been helping me, but we’re not married. Don’t listen to him. I won’t give him the right to speak.

Naama, did you really have the courage for all that or am I only imagining?
Chapter 16: We’re Good Together

What I feared is coming true: as we climb the stairs, another couple are coming down.

They are walking apart. She is two stairs ahead of him, hurrying out. Her eyes evading mine. His steps are light. They are neither young nor old, in their late thirties or early forties. They’ve already seen something of life, like us. I know what you’ve been doing, I want to say to her, knowing she will answer: exactly what you’re going to do.

The hourly hotel, or whatever it’s called, is hidden beside the main road, behind an avenue of casuarinas. An internal road leads to a parking lot at the back. Yuval puts the new Honda into first gear, maneuvers in reverse and parks facing the exit in the far corner. He surveys the area rapidly, his eyes investigating.

*The coast is clear*, he announces with satisfaction.

*Have you been here before?*

*No, I told you. Dolberger said it’s clean and they don’t ask questions.*

*What would we do without Dolberger.*

*We’d do it anyway*, he laughs.

At the entrance, as is usual in a hotel; there’s a reception counter. A dark-haired woman, sitting behind it, absorbed in calculations, raises her head when she hears our footsteps. *A room*, says Yuval, taking out the banknotes prepared in advance, and she hands him a small card: *Name and address, please.* Her voice is a pleasant alto.

*Dr. Karni*, he scribbles, *3 Dekel Street, Haifa*, adds a scrawled signature and she is already handing him a Yale key. Without checking identity, without doubting, she adds a receipt torn out of an anonymous receipt pad, the kind that can be purchased in any newspaper store. *Second floor, room, 37, to the right along the*
corridor, she recites in a flat voice and her eyes are already back on her sheet of calculations.

*It's easy for you to change your name and address, but not your title,* I deduce, breathing a sigh of relief: she didn’t look in my direction, inspect me or denounce me.

*I worked hard for it.*

It guarantees respect, even here, I interpret to myself, and admit again, for the thousandth time, my own laziness, the ability to leave things incomplete, to remain in between. Following his confident stride, stepping up my pace, I must check:

*It looks as if you’ve been here before.*

And just then the couple comes down from the landing of the second floor. She is in front of him, looking ahead, neither seeing nor hearing. Her face a tranquil mask, he is walking lightly behind. I don’t know them; they don’t know me. It could have been much worse, I think, relieved. And when she trips and clutches the wooden banister so as not to fall, and her body straightens up abruptly and continues the descent, without pause to catch breath, without the relaxation that follows avoiding a fall, I know that she too is having lustful and shameful thoughts, as if we had shouted out to one another, a sisterhood of Amazon warriors: how foolish it was to come here!

We have a reason for coming here, having decided to conduct an experiment in objectivity, After we’ve been together in my apartment and his and in the apartments of his friends, after the fragile novelty, the faint edginess and the tension of foreignness – the familiar objects begin to cry out.

*Let’s not meet here any more,* I say to him one morning in my house. *Instead of being easier, it’s becoming harder.*

We have agreed signals. Yuval telephones and cuts off after two rings. If the coast is clear, in other words if Yoram is not there, I call back. But Yuval no longer calls frequently, nor do I. Once he
used to go down to the cafeteria for a few minutes, or find a stolen half-hour to escape to a café near the hospital for chit-chat, just to look at one another, to smile, to touch a sleeve or a knee with loaded weightlessness, to straighten a collar. But for more than a year we have been alarmingly functional.

I have about an hour free, he reports when I call him back. Can we meet?

It’s not always possible. Sometimes the mornings bring inexplicable sadness, which gathers like a flock of curly sheep, bleating for something but not knowing what. Then I say: Uri, Yuval, Yoram, not today. Those are days of self-sadism. A silent punitive mechanism takes over cells and membranes, without reasoning or choice. Want to go want not to go. Want to want to go and want not to want. Want to want a lively, turbulent wanting and want to want a dead, dying wanting. The living naturally triumphs, because it enables me to say I wanted to, but, what could I do, I couldn’t. The main thing is that I wanted to.

As on that hallucinatory evening, when we were still passionate, catching up, trying to find in one another’s body what had failed us in others, immersed in those fragile moments when the faint shadow of further disappointment could still either disperse or increase: Come, he telephones, Tamar has gone to Sdot Yam with the baby and the little girl. We’ll have all night if you like. Can you make some excuse?

I’ll try, I reply excitedly, don’t know how and when, but I’ll invent something.

I’ll be waiting, even if it’s late.

Again desire drips into the arteries. You are awaited. In strange houses, in beds, which are not yours, they are thinking about you. Nectar, which could be called energy, thickens the blood. I can already see the darkness which envelops me like a blanket when I drive to him, park in the next street and avoid neighbors returning
home late or the snooping accountant, knock on the door which opens soundlessly, and come to him with slow steps, floating, cataloging the joy which will light up his cold, blue eyes, the sense of liberation with which he will stretch out his arms to me. And even if the lovemaking or the fuck or intercourse, all those terms occur to me, is not really great because of the limitations of the body or the imagination, or because we have not yet learned how to play on each other’s bodies – the old, vague lust is already gnawing, adding flavor to the touch of flesh on flesh, skin on skin, as if they were souls.

But I didn’t go to him.
Of course.

Was I scared of what I always aspired to? That I would finally find the answer to the nagging yearning, achieve that simple, everyday fullness with a twin soul? That at night, cheating everyone, in one another’s arms, the barriers of sex, experience and outlook would fall and we would say to one another through the flesh what the soul would continue to feel next morning?

Or did I know that if I went over and passed a feverish hand over his forehead, awakening him from dream-ravaged sleep, he would greet me lovingly, rescued from the cage of his own life, exposing remnants of forgotten, tender and lost childhood, delving into me for all the loves he ever had and would still have, and we would make love and talk and never notice the advent of dawn….

And in the morning, would we return to our separate homes and work and live, or would we realize that the vessels have broken, and a new world was rising and growing out of the ruins?

And perhaps I really knew that even if we loved the way we had never loved before – which was unlikely because ‘the thing that has been is that that shall be’ – and the hallucinatory night deceived us into thinking that we alone were left, and that it was different for us, still we were we, each on his own, and there was no difference
between a night in his home and a night in mine or in a friend’s apartment. A night is still only a stolen interval in the continuum of days and years, and the illusion of change is better than one tangible disappointment.

I didn’t go to him but I went out that evening to visit a colleague from work and, on the way, ignoring the idle chatter of the young peacocks on the army radio station, waiting for a musical interlude, and afterwards as well, in her apartment, in the course of our casual conversation, crammed with gossip, over a dish of cookies, I imagined him waiting for me: his impatient glances at his watch, his hesitation as to whether to go to bed or to wait, his uncertainty about telephoning the coded signal, and after midnight, I stood up, as pretty as Cinderella but freer, and drove home to find Yoram drowsing in the living room, the Sony earphones playing his favorite music directly into his ears, to ask him casually Did anyone phone? and to sink into bed, shattered by conversations with myself and at myself, feeling that I had served my sentence and the world and fate would no longer torment me. I wanted so much to go but I didn’t, and as for those who punish themselves – even God is willing to help them.

Was I hovering momentarily on that narrow, tenuous borderline where relationships are determined? A split second here, and they take control of you and create worlds in which you are borne to new places. A split second there, and they retreat to a silent, protracted dying.

When Yuval and I have sex in one of our homes, the familiar objects cry out. The pillow from which Yoram recently raised his head, the coffee cup in the breakfast niche, and the wide pages of Haaretz spread between us. Just another day, with blue skies smiling at us. Why are you bringing in a strange man, they shout at me. The pleasure of deception, the self-confirmation bestowed
by betrayal, any betrayal, lose their flavor. Uncomfortable. Is that the correct term?

*I feel uncomfortable about him,* I say to Yuval. *I don’t want to do it at home any more. Would you be comfortable about doing it in your house?*

*Tamar is always home,* he replies irrelevantly and relevantly.

Room 37 is not the last along the corridor. One of many, it stares at us blankly. Only the small metal letters on the white door invite us to enter: Inside; a bed, a window, a bureau, a bathroom and a strong odor of air-freshener.

*It’s surprising clean,* I say, relieved.

*That was the condition,* Yuval smiles. He’s been growing a beard for a month, and his determinedly sprouting hair makes him look like a chansonnier, and tempts me to tug his moustache. There are stray grey hairs in his beard, at his temples, adding a mature, devil-may-care look.

*Let’s pull it out,* I tug at a hair and he yells as if I really meant it.

*If I find you a young girl, you could end up bald,* I laugh, and when he gives me an inquisitive, blank look, I tell him the midrash about the old man who took a second, young wife and she pulled out all his white hairs, in order to make him look younger, while his elderly first wife plucked out all the remaining black hairs. My rapid speech shatters the cry of the bare walls and the wide bed: Why are you play-acting. Start doing what you came here to do.

Horribly functional.

Yuval undresses. Our clothes no longer fall into a hasty pile. Calmly, we arrange them on the bureau, side by side, and are left in our underwear. Yuval’s back has grown thicker with the years and the skinny boy has soft rolls of fat on his hips. Colored boxer shorts – the more formal and respectable his outer garments, the livelier his shorts – cover his flat behind, and his hand no longer reaches in to free them. I go over to the window overlooking
the parking lot. Between the tree branches, car roofs are visible, multicolored and truncated.

*There are a lot of people in the hotel,* I say.

*What did you think, that we’re exceptional?*

*They’re doing exactly what we’re going to do.*

*It’s time we did it instead of talking.*

I go over to him on the bed: a sacrificial lamb, a doe, a wild cat?

Delicately, sensitively, slowly, that is to say skillfully or out of habit, he peels off the straps of the expensive brassiere and opens it. Rapidly I slip off the silk panties. My stomach is not much to look at. I survey it critically, rounded, a heap of wheat. Caressing one another we begin the dance which can no longer reveal anything new to us. Not even here.

Vicky is sleeping, darkness in her room and in mine and only the lights of passing cars cast startled stripes on the ceiling. Leaning against the high pillows I am split in two. The inside of my head breeds dreams, my chest breeds memories, but from the hips down a dead, suppressed organ lives its own life in which I play no part.

How did it all start? Like life, stealthily. Sprouting in secret in the ovaries, which betrayed their task, creating cells that sought out other cells instead of ova, demonstrating to me that fertility is as many-faceted as feelings. Independent life, surplus, overflowing, covert, mocks me for believing that my calculations, my soul-searching and my cataloging rendered me self-aware, I – who am blind, dumb.

What right have I to say: I heard, I saw, I thought, I intended, I felt. What about I wanted? I loved?

I am tired. The brief cycle of drugs prevents pain, but does not surmount weakness. The delegation from the home hospice will be here in the morning and what will they add? Vitamins?
Even the pleasure at memories of sex is becoming anemic. An event, and another event, and another event. Is that your life, Dana? Are those your men? Pathetic infinitesimal details of memories of lovemaking?

Where are you, Dana? You’re here, Dana. There is no Dana. I’m Dana. Clinging to details, at least preserving my sanity, my sobriety, my memory. Details which are me, details which are not me. Like infinite arithmetic exercises, one plus two plus three, maintaining transmissions in the brain, exercising the synapses so that they are not blocked. Like an aging accountant informed of the advent of Alzheimer, she keeps exercising, building and dismantling balance sheets in the depths of her brain. Each flash of memory is an exercise in resuscitation: even if it does not speed up the pulse and no longer stirs up the blood, it still banishes pain.

It creates resting points in the final race. An exercise in freezing time.

In the phallus museum I intend to establish (an exercise in passing time) all the walls will be covered in drawings of the phallus, in procession, like the wonderful series illustrating evolution: from the bent ape through Neanderthal man up to homo sapiens. From the organ of a sleeping infant, like the sweet little finger I saw in Dorit’s apartment, through the adolescent one, soft, thickening, hardening, culminating in the giant towering cocks of porno stars. In natural colors, pink and yellow and black, straight and bent, with an orifice in the head or flawed, with the orifice on the side, branched tendons, blue veins, side by side in rising arithmetic progression, erect. What will be the fate of the last one, its diameter? Will it be circumcised and rounded or have sagging skin?

A row of defiant erections, concealing their vulnerability by butting roughly.

Berta, where are you?
Lorena Bobbitt had the best idea. She was the only one who knew how to cut the Gordian knot with a single knife blow and even emerge unscathed. Unbelievable!

_We’re happy, aren’t we_, asks-declares Dr Yuval Carmi as we sit over lunch downstairs in Café Oslo, and the foreign waitress, Chinese or Vietnamese or Thai, I have no idea, which, serves the set menu. Yuval is hungry, a hasty meeting in his lunch break, his beeper firmly attached to his belt, covered by his sweatshirt. I am picking at cheesecake.

_We’re good together_, he repeats after a pause, _aren’t we? But I wouldn’t want our enjoyment to hurt Tamar or Yoram, Our enjoyment doesn’t have to be at the expense of theirs. We don’t want to hurt them, neither you nor I. Think what Yoram would feel if he knew about us._

_The same as Tamar_, I reply.  
_Precisely, and she might be more hurt, because this isn’t the first time that I’m doing this to her_. He chews the beef with Indian spices, heaps onto his fork peas and baby potatoes, baked in butter, herbs and yoghurt, and directs them rapidly and skillfully to his mouth. 

_Tamar and Yoram won’t know about us because we won’t tell them, at least I won’t. Or is it that you suddenly feel like confessing? _

_Are you out of your mind?_ he blurts anxiously from a full mouth. 
_So why are you being sanctimonious. After all, you don’t think about her and neither do I, nor about Yoram. When we started meeting did we think about them? I don’t think so? We’re meeting because we wanted to. Period. And if now we don’t want to, then, as far as I’m concerned, we can end it._

_Stop it, what’s got into you._ He picks up a paper napkin, wipes his lips. _Nobody wants to end it. Yoram won’t know and Tamar won’t know and nobody will get hurt._

_What exactly won’t they know?_ I insist. 
_He looks at me with interest. What do you mean: that we’re meeting!_
So why all that speech about how good things are with us and good or not with them? And apart from that, if we were happy with them, perhaps we wouldn’t be here now.

In my case it’s just filling in gaps, he replies hurriedly, watching me with concentration. *I love Tamar, I loved you in the tenth grade.* And he throws the stained napkin, bunched up, onto his plate.

*I love Yoram too. I told you that at the beginning.*

*So what are we doing here,* he asks, trying to smile, and I laugh:

*Finally the penny dropped?* And as he looks at me pathetically, I add: *You said filling in gaps, OK, let’s leave it at that.*

*That’s exactly what I mean,* Yuval breathes a sigh of relief. *We needed to mark out the limits, that’s all I wanted.*

*Mark out territory? It’s easier to unzip and piss.*

He looks at me contemplatively, frowning.

*You know, like a dog,* I explain, and regret it for a moment.

What made me angry? His arrogant voice, the pious squirming, or, on the contrary, the truth? *Dear Dana,* you are meeting-sleeping with someone you knew when he was sixteen, you know nothing at all about the man sitting opposite you now.

Looking into his pale blue eyes, fixed on me, I continue: *Dogs mark out their area of jurisdiction by the smell of their secretions.*

*You don’t have to explain,* he hisses. *I studied biology,* you may remember. *I’m a doctor.*

*So why are you looking at me like a zombie?* *For other reasons.* It seems that he’s about to say something, but changes his mind.

*Look,* I conclude wearily, *I’m happily married,* don’t get me wrong, *but the word ‘happiness’ is …* *It’s superfluous,* I know.

*You said it.* *I meant that it misrepresents.*

*OK, let’s stop philosophizing.* What’s important is that neither of us should foster excessive hopes about this relationship.

*Hopes?* I am sincerely shocked. *Hopes of what?*
How do I know?
Do you really think that I imagine that if I was married to you, life would be better?
Dana, come on, enough.
No, you started.
No, I just said that I don’t want to hurt Yoram and Tamar.
But we are hurting them, don’t you understand? If you don’t want to cause hurt then don’t call me and let’s not meet.
Dana.
I’m fed up with the bullshit. We’re lovers. Two cheaters, do you get it? Cheating by choice. There’s no need to pretend.
Enough, Dana, enough. I don’t remember you like this.
From back when could you remember, from…I start calculating, furious, when his beeper sounds and rescues Yuval from me and me from him and from myself. Dr. Carmi reads the text message happily and gets up quickly.
It’s OK, run along, I’ll pay, I anticipate his request.
Thanks, Danush, I’ll call you soon.
Rapidly, he collects his spectacles, the folded newspaper pages and the pack of Marlboro Lights he’s begun smoking recently.
Bye.
Bye.
The check, I gesture to the Chinese-Vietnamese waitress who came from Thailand, and a receipt. Let her think I’m a successful businesswoman deducting the cost of the meal from the vast expense account sanctioned by the balance sheet, not just a sucker who feeds escaping lovers.
As if she’ll give me a thought after I leave, as if she’s thinking about me now, I mean then. And if she thought, I doubt she gave me a second thought.

Under the blue covers, the blue sheet, on each occasion a different blue but still blue, beneath the mirror, the end begins. We
have one stammering year left. The bedside lamp illuminates our bodies, he is between my legs, focusing on his cock which enters me and withdraws, I am watching the light, naked sole of his foot with a hard strip of skin on the heel, observing my right breast, protruding between our bodies, white, swollen, even erotic, sensing a familiar boredom beginning to take over.

What do we talk about in between?

About the daughter starting junior high, *she's gorgeous*, he boasts enthusiastically. About the little boy, *a real tough guy*. I think it was then that they started working on the third. Sometimes about the head physician, who exploits the achievements of his staff for personal advancement. Yuval no longer complains that the chief and his deputy keep disappearing from the hospital to their private practices. Promotion lies ahead for him as well. Fervently, undoubting, he explains that treating private patient doesn’t mean that patients from the public sick fund suffers discrimination. *Each of them receives maximum attention*; he scolds me, furrowing his brows, even angry. *Nobody neglects anybody. You don't understand. People who aren't part of the system don't know what they're talking about. We have no alternative.*

*Apart from that,* he stares at me, *have you ever received anything worth something without paying for it?* I don’t argue with Yuval either. What for?

We call one another rarely, once every two or three months. Sometimes he’s the initiator, sometimes I am. Soon I’ll begin to check the ratios. Who calls who more? In order to preserve self respect, according to Grandma Knows Best, in order to draw a line over what you won’t permit yourself to lose. But in any case it’s shrinking.
Chapter 17: A Hot Viscious Liquid

The hospital is an old corner building in south Tel Aviv, between the big department store and the Carmel market, a stones-throw from the municipal library. Life has its own way of laughing at you. The last time I was in the neighborhood, trying to decide between black silk and off-white, I didn't know it existed. Now I’m waiting on the second floor. A somnolent girl with a bandaged nose has just been brought out of the operating room. An older woman runs to her, walks alongside the bed to the end of the corridor, and they are swallowed up in one of the rooms.

You need courage to have nose surgery, I think, to take a decision about yourself as if you were God, to know what’s beautiful and what’s ugly, to trust a doctor, a stranger, to know what you will find beautiful and what ugly. You also need self-love. Uri and I are the only ones sitting on the bench. I twist the ring with the golden heart inward. The heart is concealed between fingers and palm and only a narrow strip of gold attests to legality and respectability.

I’m going out for a breather, the smell is driving me nuts, says Uri and is gone, as if he never existed. I too suddenly sense acutely how the smells of Lysol and chlorine and the jasmine fragrance of the air-freshener are clashing without harmonizing. It is a little dark in this inner room beside the operating rooms, and apart from a picture of cypresses and monkeys beside a red-tiled roof and a river, there is nothing to catch the eye and distract the mind. I’m neither hungry nor thirsty. Only the dryness in my mouth is whitening my tongue and the morning sickness of the past two weeks to which I’m still unaccustomed, gnaws at me, refusing to let go.

It’s dark in the inner room and I concentrate, warding off all thoughts of what is developing inside me. It’ll be OK, I soothe myself, repeating the reassurances of Dorit, whose offer
to accompany me I refused. I could not have tolerated her eyes empathizing with my non-existent sorrow.

_Are you crazy, a child now? Out of the question._

_You’ll regret it. I’m not referring to the religious aspect. I don’t consider abortion to be murder or anything like that, but in the end one can always manage._

_That’s not what bothers me. I can’t see Uri and me as parents, and he doesn’t want it either._

_You’ve been together for almost a year._

_So what, it doesn’t get better, only worse. Do you want us to marry just for the sake of a child?_  

_Yes._  

_No._  

_And you’re not scared?_  

_A mysterious panther lurks in the dark, ready to spring, Scared? Scared to death. But that doesn’t change the conclusion. All the proclaimed, correct reasons: not ready for a child, no apartment, we haven’t completed our studies. And all the true reasons, between me and myself, between Uri, and me, including complete ownership of my body and my decisions. Nonetheless, another reason remains, inexpressible but seething within me. Wordless, with quiet forceful decisiveness._

_How much air does someone need to breathe out there, among cars and old buildings? Uri doesn’t return, and I slump heavily on the wooden bench. Whence cometh my help? A middle-aged nurse comes over to me, not a trace of sympathy on her face, no accusation or compassion either. _Mrs Dotan?_ And if she had not been standing beside me, I would not have remembered and responded. _I’ve brought you a pill to take; now,_ she commands and drops a round white object in my hand. _Here’s a gown and robe. Take everything off, panties, bra, watch, rings, everything. We’re going in soon._

_The irritating plural. You’re not going in, just me, only me._
Silently I go to the bathroom, strip. Soft, white vulnerable skin, goose-fleshed despite the heat. It’ll be OK, Dana, no problems, Dana, everything passes, Dana. Something vague, formless, ugly, a fishlike lump, is growing inside, subject of discussion in forgotten biology lessons. No more than that. It’s not you, Dana.

_Didn’t you bring a bag?_ asks the nurse in an accusing tone as I come out, holding a folded pile of clothes.

Uri hasn’t returned yet. Perhaps he’s escaped? In folklore, the men lose their cool in such situations. It’s not mine, are you sure it’s mine? Or else they disappear, refusing to take responsibility or to help with the funding. In the folklore tales there are some whose eyes light up, and whose imagination speedily pictures tiny plump feet pressing against their shoulders as they carry them to the local football pitch, or a little hand with cute fingers clutching their large palm. Real saccharine. I’m going to have a child? You’ll have my child? They thank you, chest swelled with pride.

_We won’t have a child. Don’t want a child. Not now,_ said Uri, stunned. _It’s not part of the plan._

_The last thing I need now is a child,_ I agree.

But still he fled.

For a breather.

_I want your child,_ I said to Yehoyada. A girl of twenty something, a day after the concert, both of us naked in the apartment in Hanevi’im Street. I am lying on my back, sprawled in pampered indolence, arms spread, and he is talking and kissing, chatting and licking my navel, the ribs which highlight the skin, passing a coarse tongue over the underside of breasts. Gleaming, virginal flesh, never exposed to light, is hidden there.

_My beauty,_ whispers Yehoyada, _there’s nobody like you, honey and sweetness, my honeycomb._ He swallows his saliva and his tongue continues its work. One hand in between my legs. _Be with me, don’t run away, my swallow, Dana, my little honey._ I tremble, a quiver
goes through dozens of nerves whose names I don’t know but whose location is clearly marked, each place his tongue touches, each place where his nose burrows, that his finger exposes, and all those changing, varying places send out spasmodic signals, driven wild between gratification and pleasure.

*I want a child with you,* I repeat. *The fruit of love.* Isn’t that what they call it in novels?

Stretching, I pass a hand down his sides, smooth the inner skin of his arm, and caress the white skin, which sags slightly.

*A child?* Yehoyada halts for a moment, and his hand replaces his tongue, cupping and stroking. *You still have time,* he says, and his mouth moves down to the nipple. *You’re so young.* *I’m your child now,* and he sucks the nipple painfully.

Suddenly I am clearly aware of the emptiness of the sentence I’ve uttered. Words which emerged incisively turn into a false declaration. Why a child? There’s no child without a mother. Am I a mother? Extending my body towards him, pressing his body to mine, my hands on his hips, I know what I want to be. A femme fatale, a man-eater, tripping in my crinoline through high-ceilinged halls, illuminated by heavy crystal candelabra or gas lamps, waving my fan, gesturing to the oldest member of the group to approach –

No, a femme fatale wears black. Clutching a long cigarette holder, in men’s trousers, flat-heeled shoes resting on the chest of a man lying prone at my feet, awaiting my commands.

*Don’t arrange any more tickets for me,* I say, remembering. *I felt terrible.*

*I’ve been thinking about it,* he says. *It was a mistake.*

But yesterday you were feeling fine, at least that’s how you looked, completely content, I think to myself but say nothing.

A gala performance by Daniel Barenboim, conducted by Zubin Mehta, the posters announce, and Yehoyada, with a flourish, hands me a ticket for the Mann Auditorium. *Don’t ask me how I got it,* he
says. It was difficult. Get dressed up and come.

Will you be there?

Well be there, he corrects me and I understand instantly. Our tickets are in the first few rows, you're a few rows back, but it's a good seat.

He needn't say anything else. I fill in the gaps from experience, from anger.

I tried to dress elegantly. I even told my parents about the concert. I chose earrings, high heels, smeared on a little pink lipstick, upper lip then lower, rubbing them together.

Imma regards me with pleasure, tut-tutting. Alone? Shall I go with you?

Dorit is waiting for me. We'll meet at the entrance. What would I do without her that is to say without her name? Itzik doesn't like concerts. I feel the need to explain.

Take my coat, Imma suggests, placing over my shoulders a green cloth coat with a fur collar. You have to dress properly for the Mann Auditorium.

Now we'll order you a taxi, says Abba and an unpleasant sensation fills me. The dreams they weave around me. Or are they too pretending? They are sending me in the pumpkin coach, equipped with the appurtenances of femininity to catch a husband among the upholstered seats.

In the Mann Auditorium in those days, everyone was dressed comme il faut. Women in evening dress, men in suits, a vanishing generation. Grey hair, dyed hair. Without difficulty I spy them in one of the front rows, close to the aisle. Yehoyada is holding the musical score, Helena's hair is held tightly with a gold clip. On either side of me sit elderly couples, it's a subscription concert, regular seats. I shift uneasily, trying to catch the evasive glance of my neighbors who undoubtedly know who gave me the ticket, who paid for it and why.

The music, passing over my head with a violent crescendo,
means nothing to me. The numerous bouts of coughing are more persuasive. I can’t remember what was played and how. The reviews I read next morning, in case Yehoyada asked my opinion, were fulsome in their praise. I sat fettered, out of place, my forehead burning with the mark of shame. In the interval, during the exodus to the lobbies and the cafeteria, I remained seated. Yehoyada, his wife hanging on his arm, walked in stately fashion, smiling from time to time at people who addressed him, never once turning his eyes towards me.

When the concert ends, finally, I hasten to leave, without waiting for my neighbors to rise, weaving my way past their legs, angry at myself for lacking the courage to leave earlier. In the coat with fur collar, suffering torture in shoes with thin heels and pointed toes, I stumble across the marble floor, fleeing to the dark parking lot and from there to the boulevard. Tak tak tak go the heels on the road, psh psh, the points sink into the soil of the boulevard, scratched by gravel and sand. Even the delight of betrayal has been taken from me. If only he had sneaked a smile, a clandestine glance, I would have been content with the dividend, with the knowledge that ‘Nobody knows but me’: she is at his side, in the light, but I am in his heart, in that bastion, even though I’m hiding. But the old lecher probably feels wonderful. With one on his arm, a second one in the auditorium, he’s talking to friends, poring over the musical score, applauding.

Uri finally comes back. *I ate something*, he announces, *a toasted sandwich*. He is still holding a can of Coke. I take a deep breath. The sight of the cheese, stretched, melting, pressed between two toasted slices, rouses in me both hunger and nausea.

*Don’t talk about food. Do you have a bag or something where I can store my clothes?*

*Didn’t you bring anything?* he too asks, everyone asks. Why does nobody know how to give answers?
Are you together? asks the nurse when she sees Uri at my side. I’ve brought you a bag for your clothes, she turns to me, holding out a nylon bag. Her hand, with peeling red nail varnish, smooths her blond hair.

Uri smiles. His brown eyes are glowing as they did when we first met. He is at his best in the presence of strangers, particularly women.

Thank you very much. Do we have to wait much longer? asks the perfect husband.

The doctor is already here, she smiles back. I am naked under the gown, wrapped in the robe, exposed. Each inch of flesh is bristling, each bristle has eyes, sends out antennae.

Come, we’ll show you the room, she is addressing me in the plural again. Uri is beside her, and I shuffle behind them to the end of the corridor, to the doorway through which the young girl with the bandaged nose and her mother disappeared, a room with three iron bedsteads painted white, with guardrails, a bedside locker and a kidney-shaped bowl beside each.

Really private, Uri comments.

Don’t worry, she smiles and is immediately serious, smoothing her hair again. There will only be two beds occupied. There was a cancellation this morning.

You work here in series, I say, a real assembly line, and on my way to the window I am happy to note the wrinkle of hostility tightening her mouth and jutting her chin. No trees, no lawn, grey pavestones leading to the garbage can structure and through the slats of the blinds on the square windows of the adjacent office building, lights are reflected.

Genia? A voice sounds in the corridor, and a woman in a white coat is standing at the door. Ah, you’re here. Are you ready? she asks me. The doctor is waiting. I follow her, not a lamb, not a cub, not me, not human.

A woman.
What has my memory retained of the abortion room, or am I envisaging it out of the familiar components of many surgeries I’ve lain in over the years? The multi-eyed light in the ceiling, the chair-bed with stirrups. The tray with its neat arrangement of knives, pincers, forceps of shapes and sizes, which the eye tries but fails to list. Syringes, surgical cotton, little bottles of antiseptics and alcohol, oxygen canisters. Dr. Granovitzky smiles at me, the privilege of a private patient, and I clutch his hand, needing him out of desperate urge for contact, for a smile, for attention, willing to content myself with a word.

*Everything will be fine*, he leaves his hand in mine. *You’ll be asleep in a moment. Everything will be fine.*

A young man is standing at my head, a surgical mask half-mast on his face. His eyes are smiling.

_They told me you’re a student_, he says, _so you know how to count. Now you’ll get a shot_, and he ties a rubber band round my arm. A dark-haired young woman is moving my legs, strapping them high up on the sides of the bed and thus, exposed, gaping open, detached, I begin to count. I’m not asleep; I’m still awake, I shout between counting eight and nine. A strange heat spreads through my body.

And if I said more than that – I’d be lying.

_The Gideonites_, Yehoyada dictates, _were only thirty in number_. I am sitting on the couch, the typewriter on the green felt cloth, and he is pacing up and down, holding sheets of paper with dense lines on them. _Alexander, as noted, was their leader, but although they believed in the power of self-labor and aided the Jewish settlers, the Russian pioneers mocked them colon quotes can it be comma that the grandsons of the Baron are cleaning sewers question mark close quotes wrote Yaakov Zrubavel in quotes He’abdat close quotes the organ of Poalei Zion period. Once an image is established it cannot be altered._
The labor leaders assumed that the sons of Zikhron were remote from socialist ideals and…

Just a minute, soc-ia-list, I spell out.

Their friendly attitude towards the Arabs in contrast to their objections to the Jewish Second Aliyah pioneers, evoked anger. However, it should not be forgotten, Yehoyada continues, that an Arab laborer was paid 4 grush per day while the Jewish laborer received 10-12. When the land at Zmarin was cleared of stones, one thousand two hundred Arab laborers took part and only one hundred and fifty or two hundred Jews. When one speaks with admiration about the Second Aliyah, Yehoyada continues, his voice rising…

Slower, please, I can’t keep up.

It should be recalled that whereas two thousand pioneers arrived in the country between 1904-1906 most of them went back to where they came from. The periodical Hapoel Hatzair estimated the number of Jewish laborers in 1909 quote at more than three hundred close quotes. According to lists drawn up by Zeev Smilansky in 1912 not more than 522 Jews were working in the moshavim, and this figure includes the Yemenite immigrants.


The gap
What gap, in wages?
No, I know about that, I mean the gap in numbers.
What numbers?
Of pioneers. Between what I always thought and what really happened. The haystacks, the Shomer movement, the Russian songs, the kibbutzim, the moshavot, making the desert blossom – only three hundred?

Stop it? he says angrily, his cheeks reddening and his spectacles slipping down as he fixed me with a hard stare. You are confusing periods and concepts. I’m referring to 1913, when Alexander set up the Gideonites. They lasted 14 months and met with resistance and
contempt and in order to understand what precisely went on there I’m just beginning to show the two sides of the coin.

Yes, I try again, finding it hard to explain, but you understand what I understand, that…

Not now, he cuts me short, let’s finish the page. The gap between reality and myth is not a matter of truth and falsehood. In many cases, we need the myth in order to survive in a difficult reality, and even if it transpires afterwards that the myth lacks factual basis, as long as it fulfilled its function I regard it as no different to any fact.

And you’re a historian? I ask.

Yes. He observes me with interest as if he’s discovered a new side to me, and we’ll discuss it some other time. Now get back to typing.

And I do, pecking away patiently, my skirt exposing smooth, angular knees and the beginning of slim thighs. Typing patiently, now without listening to the content, just to the sound, I learn another lesson. The truth, even when discovered, is not unequivocal. Sometimes it isn’t even the truth.

Like moments of love, says Yehoyada later. When you grow up, you’ll understand. What’s its connection to reality? And what is reality? What you see in me? What I see in you? And even enjoyment itself is no great pleasure. Do you know that even the strongest sensual pleasure, the moment of sexual climax, what we call orgasm, is located somewhere on the scale of pain? That brief moment, those strong, pleasurable sensual moments – are hard to distinguish from pain.

I still don’t know what orgasm is. Yehoyada asks each time: Was that good for you? Was that good?

And I say: Yes, very good.

Dana doesn’t lie, Dana simply doesn’t know. Quite a few years will lapse before she knows. Until the right man comes along, stubborn in his own way. Meanwhile it’s good for her as it is. The heat that transfers from body to body, the friction, the trembling of
the skin. A craving which is not satisfied remains hungry, nurtures new sensations. What’s wrong with that?

Nothing’s wrong. The reverse is true. Avishag shivers in Yakir’s arms, doesn’t know what’s missing or if indeed anything is missing, absorbs every touch, discovers in her body hidden conduits of passion, spinning in swelling circles. Say ‘come to me’, he tells her, and her lips attempt it. Say ‘I love your penis, learn to talk!’ he begs, persuades, and the words begin to flow.

Does Yakir really not know? From the height of his more than sixty years, his experience, his French women, the books he’s read, how can he not have known that the young woman he is cultivating, discovering in her and revealing to her endless currents of sensation, does not reach orgasm. Nonetheless he is content with asking, with her answer, untroubled.

And why should he be? Was I truly important to him? Could he have wanted the best for me, younger than his sons, foolish, yielding to his fingers? Perhaps he too, like me, judges and condemns those who surrender to him. If they are here with me, of what value can they be?

Dana the pushover.

Of course he knew. Otherwise he would not have explained to me the scale of sensations in which orgasm is supposed to flicker somewhere between pleasure and pain.

*When you grow up, you’ll understand*, he concludes in patronizing fashion. And you grow up and are not willing to understand.

I wake up in the bed near the door, woozy, trying to vomit, snatching the kidney-shaped bowl, begging for water, but there is nobody to hear. A block of stone is lying on my lower belly, nailing it to the mattress. Concentrating on the sensations rising from there, I repeat to myself: it’s empty; empty, gone, removed, over. Just the familiar pains, spasms like period pains at the wrong time.
attest to something having occurred. That’s it, I’m free. I try to feel happy. My lips are dry. Greenish-yellow juice is expelled into the bowl, leaving a bitter taste. I turn my head aside, afraid to move for fear of increasing the bleeding, note the raised bedrail in the bed beside mine and behind it a drowsy woman mumbling vague syllables.

*Very good, I see we’re up*, the plurals of the blond, black-rooted nurse with the peeling nails reach me.

*Water, please*, I beg.

*Here*, she places a pill and a glass of water on the bedside locker. *It’s something for the pain. Your boyfriend said he’d pick you up this evening.* And she has already turned to the next bed, lowering the rail and shaking the woman: *Up, Mrs. Bronstein, up…*

The woman falls silent as she opens her eyes. *Tsu trinken*, Genia says, handing her the pill and the glass of water, and Mrs. Bronstein sits up hurriedly, looks at her and at me in horror, gropes under her pillow and brings out a dotted head scarf. She covers her hair, takes the pill in one swallow and instantly lies down, with a sigh.

*Your boyfriend*, she said. What happened to Mr. and Mrs. Dotan? Did he tell her? I feel humiliated. What’s happening to me? How did I do this to myself?

Mrs. Bronstein turns her back on me and looks towards the window. Unlike her, I am afraid to move. Sadness nibbles at me, anger at Uri, a sharp, hitherto unknown rage. What’s the big deal? Why couldn’t he stay and sit beside me? No, apparently not, I reply. Self-pity and loneliness swell up from my lower belly, drain into my chest, and burst into my eyes. This is not how life should be. How come I always manage to foul it up? First Yehoyada, now Uri, each concerned for himself. Stupid, I say to myself, weeping: I have only one word for you, stupid.

And the tears fall, hot, soaking into the pillow.
I wait for Uri, dressed. On the bedside locker is a supper tray with the remnants of a cheese sandwich, salad and a hard-boiled egg. Olive pits, nibbled clean, lie on a plate. There’s a plastic cup with the dregs of a liquid, half-coffee half-tea. The crumbs of egg yolk taste wonderful without the morning sickness. It’s now between five and six and the lights of the office building opposite are still on. Mrs. Bronstein left half an hour ago. A short man sat beside her, took a thermos flask and some plastic boxes out of his big-bellied bag, and an intolerable smell of chicken filled the room. From time to time I stole a glance at them: whispering together, careful not to look in my direction, eating together. At the door, wearing her best clothes, Mrs. Bronstein turned her bloated face towards me: Be in good health!

It’s not an illness, I wanted to shout at her, but she and her husband were already out in the corridor, invisible, unhearing. How come she’s up and about and I’m still a wet rag? Sitting up abruptly I straighten a hesitant leg, one, two, let both move off the mattress to the floor, into the wooden clogs I brought with me. When I stand up a hot viscous liquid slides between my thighs, absorbed in the pads.

After the disease was diagnosed and my reproductive organs were removed, I had one ironic consolation in the darkness: no more menstruation, period over and done with, no more swollen breasts, belly-aches, sudden stains on my skirt, brown because by the time they were noticed they had grown stale. How many shades of color can they have? Unbelievable. Light pink, dark red, brown, black, and the entire spectrum in between. Envying women with brief regular monthly periods, taken by surprise by the first stain, I was forced to lie down for a minute or two, to overcome the revulsion which was expressed in faint nausea.

Lying on the couch, enabling the circulating blood to flood the brain, learning to inhale deeply, I equipped myself with the
strength to stand up and go on. Nothing but a period, why are you making a fuss, four-five-six days of blood, and even if it’s intense and frightening, in the end it will stop and be forgotten until the next time.

Breathe deeply, Dana. There, the dizziness has passed. Don’t make a fuss, Dana. It’s part of the game.

Even in retrospect I don’t know and never asked what a healthy period was? Light stains? Strong flow? Three days? Seven? And if I’d asked, could I have saved myself? Would I not then be lying here, empty and hollow, frozen with weakness, counting days?

Nonsense. I don’t need more guilt feelings. There is no consolation to be found even in them. Patting oneself on the shoulder, how sensitive and tormented I am, and continuing to function as usual.

There’s no ‘as usual’ now. The usual is the unusual.

The easiest thing is to blame greedy old Granovitzky. His shaking hands. The books always caution against the possible risks of abortions, particularly warn young women pregnant for the first time. As if they were not the most desperate.

The easiest thing is to cast blame. How harsh is the simple truth that what happens sometimes happens without reason, without meaning. Just happens.

What are friends for? Uri is driving his parents’ car cautiously but every unexpected hole in the road or sudden turn jolts my lower belly, making hot liquid flow, very evident, absorbed between my legs.

That’s that, over, I say to Dorit, happy to see her, embracing. You’re not sick, says Uri, why are you so pale? It’ll pass. I play the heroine, dying to weep. I must get back to the paper, he shifts impatiently, they’re short-staffed.

So go.
Dorit is silent and when he says goodbye to the room at large and disappears, she regards me with her understanding look, both accusing and empathizing and says: _It's a long time since I saw him, so how are things between you?_

_As you saw._

_Like that?_

_Like that._

_You're hungry_, she concludes. _Do you fancy shakshuka?_

Suddenly I envy Itzik. I would also like to have a wife like that, understanding, a good cook, concerned, knowing when to keep quiet. Why can only men have wives, why can't we?
Chapter 18: Roadside Devices

The relationship with Uri is waning imperceptibly. Lying in bed in Dorit’s apartment, empty womb, full belly, I cry till my eyes redden.

*It’s the hormones,* I try to smile through the tears.

*It’ll still turn out OK,* she comforts me. Outside the door I hear infants laughing and Itzik hushing them. *You’ll get married some day; you’ll see and have as many children as you want.*

*It’s not that,* I bleat, *I don’t want children, don’t know why I’m crying,* and a crooked grimace of a smile settles on my lips, and is instantly erased.

I don’t envy Dorit, sitting beside me heavily, black rings under her eyes, which shine when she speaks of her children. There’s no need to mention them, they are everywhere: in the gradually protruding veins on the back of her hand, the laughter lines around her eyes and mouth, the commanding-patronizing tone she has begun to adopt. The apartment is full of them. A fur teddy bear and a doll on the living room couch, plastic blocks and colorful plastic toys on the carpet, the smell of sweet milk, omelettes from the kitchen and washing powder.

*I’m happy,* says Dorit, weary, content, watching me carefully so that I won’t find any cracks in her. *In another two or three years they’ll grow up and I can return to the seminar. There’s nothing like being a teacher when you have small children,* we both say in unison.

Grandma Knows Best is one hundred percent on her side. As long as you are young, have babies, that’s healthy, that’s natural, why do you think too much about everything, let nature have its way. But my nature is contrary; in my case it has a different aspect. No cosmetics, no hypocrisy, blunt directness.

Dana! Be careful! You and directness?
Uri doesn’t know the truth about Yehoyada, but a sly doubt has taken root in him, as he tries to catch me out at unexpected times.

I was careful, he says, perhaps you can explain how it happened. You’re the expert on condoms, I say angrily, sue for damages.

Do try, he says in his objective manner, to get the money, I’m really pressed. I haven’t told my parents and it’s a vast sum. We agreed that you’d share.

You want me to tell my parents?
Borrow from Dorit.
Why don’t you borrow from Motti? The hand with the beer or the hand with the cigar.
I’ve already borrowed from him. I have to pay him back.

How do conversations turn into roadside devices. Lurking, concealed, exploding in your face.

How are you, he asks as if reluctantly.
Absolutely fine, I reply defiantly.
Each word has different reverberations, words beneath words. Silent language hiding under spoken words, say no more. It’s a week since the abortion and the pads are still soaked with fresh blood. Uri isn’t worried, nor am I. That’s apparently how it’s supposed to be. There’s almost no pain and I go to work every day as usual, come home as usual, eat as usual.

You’re pale, aren’t you feeling well? Imma asks.
No, it’s my time of the month, I reply, and everything is in order although she sighs,

Silence of a new kind descends on us. Uri no longer borrows his father’s car or his friend’s jeep. We return from the university on his scooter, my breasts crushed against his back, and there is no quiver in the flesh. He talks about exams, I talk about lectures, cautious, groping conversations which don’t meet. A month after the abortion Uri suggests that I come to his house one morning.
Nobody will be there and the little room with the yellow curtains will be ours, he says, and the word ‘ours’ sounds false and alien.

*I have to study for an exam*, I send out feelers. Will he object, will he urge me?

*OK, then I’ll also use the time for studying.*

This time the word ‘studying’ is loaded with additional meanings.

*I have to study for an exam*, he announces indifferently, *we can’t meet this Friday.*

*I have to give in a paper. We won’t be able to meet Shabbat either,* I say helpfully, trying to examine how far the thin thread can be stretched before it snaps.

But it doesn’t snap, just melts away slowly till it disappears.

*What’s going on,* asks Imma. *Aren’t you seeing one another?*

*We have exams.*

*Exams didn’t bother you before.*

*Is seems that it’s not the real thing,* I tell her. *We’re not getting along.*

She settles me at the kitchen table, pours coffee.

*You’re looking for understanding? What does that mean?*

*It’s hard to define.* I’m moved. Can this be a sincere conversation between daughter and mother? Is that what’s happening now?

*We squabble all the time.*

*You’re too pampered,* she says emphatically. *I spoiled you. You don’t realize that a woman has to keep quiet, at least till the wedding.*

*Why shouldn’t the man keep quiet?*

Imma regards me forgivingly, speaking in a low voice, chewing the words she has learned by heart through a lifetime of suppression. *Men can’t keep quiet. That’s how they are built, everything is on the outside,* and she laughs embarrassed. *Why do they say when a married man sleeps with another woman that he’s spitting out of his home and when the woman does it they say she’s spitting in?*
A woman is the home; the foundation of the home and the man is the façade.

People aren’t homes.

Oh, Dana, why don’t you understand? She is almost crying.
You’re ruining your future. Uri will be an ideal husband, what does he lack? Healthy, handsome, studying law…

And economics.

There, you see. His father…

Imma!

No, listen to me for once. It’s high time. What about all those people who had arranged marriages? Didn’t they have a life? They were even more successful than love matches. Look at me. I married out of love and how did it turn out?

Imma!

Be clever, don’t ruin your life. You’re not a young girl any more.

Dorit has two children already.

Imma.

I’m not saying that you’re an old maid, but think about the future.
I do think, I do. Enough!

As if it isn’t happening if you don’t talk about it. For a whole week we don’t meet, and when we do, neither of us says an unnecessary word, but the unspoken words are the necessary ones.

There are mornings when I want to curl up in Yehoyada’s lean arms, feel their hard softness, smell the blend of Yardley and tobacco, but I hold back. What could I say to him?

I was pregnant. I had an abortion, I’m still bleeding.

Ah, he would be shocked, I’ll kill him, and then he would smile: How primitive of you. Didn’t I say you needed to see a gynecologist?

But for different reasons, I would answer self-righteously, sensing how a petty misunderstanding is turning into a symbol. Here too, with him, a man and a woman, there’s no understanding.
I can’t go to Yehoyada, even if I want to. Uri might call, and what will I say if he asks: Where were you? I’m no femme fatale; I’m good little Dana from a respectable family, a one-man girl, innocent, not particularly experienced, and certainly not a cheat.

Uri works every evening, studies in the mornings or sleeps. I write seminar papers, a line a day, go on study tours, work for a living. What kind of living do I have? My small wages go to my parents, and I pass the time in guessing: will he come or not, will he call or not. One night, particularly weary, roaming among hallucinations, a second before the unconscious descent into sleep, when fragments or sentences and images swirl dizzily, woven together, it occurs to me that nothing has changed, is changing: now too I am waiting as I once did, basic insecurity, dependence, the gnawing monster of doubt.

Two different men, entirely different circumstances. Only I remain the same, again ‘only I’.

Five years after my marriage, Yehoyada asked to see me. Yoram answered the telephone. It’s for you, he said, handing it to me, not asking who’s calling, not concerned.

Yes?

Good evening, Dana.

He doesn’t need to identify himself. The low, rich baritone fills the ear as it did before.

Oh, a strangled sound. What a surprise!

How are you? He continues the chat of mere acquaintances, two casual passersby on the streets of life.

Fine, everything’s fine. I try to instill indifference and amazement into my voice, so that he will realize that I am content with my husband, with my good and regular life, with myself, my decisions.

Can anyone overhear? I recall the shirt draped over the keyhole. What does he think, that Yoram is as paranoid as he, listening in
on the conversation?

*It’s been a long time since we spoke, how are you?* I prefer to be cautious just in case.

*Excellent,* he replies to my disappointment. *What about you?*

*As usual. Studying, working, you know.*

*No, I don’t know. You’re studying in Jerusalem now and I’m retired.*

*Yes, I know. Two semesters ago.*

*Are you keeping track?* I hear a note of triumph in his voice, and even though I’m not keeping track, I do not succeed in denying it.

*Will you have time to meet for a coffee?* he continues, and when I remain silent, trying to comprehend the meaning of the undercurrents which are clashing, resisting and melting at the same time, his voice grows lower: *Isn’t there some book you need which isn’t in the library?*

*Not at the moment.* Embarrassed, sincere, I answer the literal question.

*If you should need one, I’m at your service,* he responds to the message I did not intend to convey, *and at the same telephone number. I mean it. All the best and goodbye.*

Cutting off, he leaves my polite ‘Shalom’ hanging in the air, with reverberating electrical precision.

Attempting to calm myself, to quiet the pounding heartbeats, which fill the room, I hasten to the kitchen, to heat water. What upset me so much? His voice? The memories already stashed away in a sealed chest? Or perhaps it was merely the surprise? Would just any voice from the past have made your pulse beat faster, Dana, and made you tremble in agitation?

*Are you making coffee?* Yoram joins me. *I want some too,* and he opens the refrigerator to take out milk and asks: *Who was it?*

*Professor Yehoyada, you know who he is.*

*What did he want?*

*He asked if I need any help.*
Yoram stares at me in wonder mixed with admiration. *Your tutor? The one you invited to the wedding and he didn’t come?*

*Yes, the one who bought us a double duvet as a wedding present.*

*Yes, I thought back then that it was strange.* He scrutinizes me. *Has he got a crush on you?* he asks directly, and I want to shout: I have a crush on him and answer simply, quietly: *Could be, but I told him that I don’t need help.*

And we make the coffee together, take it out to the balcony, gaze out at the little square lawn in front of the building, the cars speeding along the road, little matchboxes. *Life is an act,* I say suddenly.

*Are you an actor?* he responds immediately. *I’m not.*

*No, I’m not either,* I say defensively. *Why do you say that?*

Silence grows between us, thick but not threatening.

*Shall we go in?* I ask.

Yoram nods, his expression lascivious. What roused his desire? The darkening evening or a latent competitiveness? A married couple doesn’t need words. The angle of a sudden slanting glance, sometimes an inviting half-smile, something in the twist of the lips, familiar to us alone. The eyes respond, speak. An assenting expression. He brings the towel, she goes into the bathroom to prepare. In bed I cling to him stubbornly, affectionately, longingly. What did that telephone conversation do to me, to me and not to him? Sensations from the past have reared up to strike me. I slake my thirst, my yearning in Yoram’s body.

There is a book that I need, I think next day. Yoram is at work, and I drive to Mount Scopus, to the university, tackling the first stages of my Ph.D. Is something missing?

*Not as far as I know.*

Dana the pretender, seeking the name of a book in order to conceal neediness. And in fact, didn’t Yehoyada do exactly the same thing? He invented a pretext to call you. *Isn’t there some book you*
need which isn’t in the library? in his rich, dear voice. For him, it’s all clear-cut. You are married; he doesn’t want to cause problems. But what about you, do you want to cause problems? Embarrassment has already been caused. You never imagined that you would be so excited, did you? I wasn’t excited... I was just surprised. Oh, boy, how excited you were. You were quick to have sex with Yoram, to stifle the longing in sex. And did you succeed? No, you didn’t. Dana, Dana, what are you scared of? It’s nothing but a shadow from the past, and, anyway, what will happen if you meet? You’re no virgin any more, nothing will happen. Nothing has happened for a long time. You stopped having sex with him when you were with Uri. What are you afraid of? A hug? And if Uri were to call you out of the blue, would you be just as agitated? No, Uri is nothing, a simple peacock, ideal as a breadwinner but worth less than nothing when it comes to lust. An unexceptional fuck, pushing in, shoving, pulling out. With Yehoyada it was different. Yes, I understand exactly what it is you’re afraid of. Yehoyada isn’t sex, he’s much worse than sex, more terrible, mightier, and vaster. Because what is sex? Two moist membranes, gorged with blood, rubbing against one another. Yehoyada is anticipation, an abyss, a river of unexpected sensations, which rise up against me. Why are you exaggerating, Oh Dana Dana, nobody ever died of raging emotions. Yes, people do die, every moment, inside, where nobody sees. They die of the presence of those emotions and die of their absence. I can’t tolerate them, not again, now that I’ve achieved serenity. The tremor of anticipation, Dana, the fragrance of Yardley and Dunhill. You want it. No! Words, Dana, just words. Nobody ever died of words.

As I sit in the library to check three references in the letters of Brigadier Walter Gribbon, Aaron Aaronson’s friend and supporter, the past rises like a phoenix from the ashes of routine. Nothing is what it seems. Is that the significance of my fixation on a subject,
which has brought the curse of oblivion on all those who dealt with it?

Who were they? A wonderful group of idealists or traitors? Did they have a realistic view of the region or were they exploiters of Arab laborers?

And what made me go back to them?
The ability to pretend? The tortured soul-searching? The thin, fragile borderline between myth and misdemeanor?
Is it the lack of reward that attracts me?
Perhaps the arbitrariness?

Anthony Verrier, researcher and journalist, is convinced that without Aaron, the Jewish people would not have been granted the Balfour Declaration, that were it not for the change of government in London and the enthusiasm of senior British figures such as Mark Sykes and Lloyd George, the pro-Arab orientation would have prevailed.

Is it the shattering of the myth that excites me?
Keeping the secret of Feinberg’s death from the brothers as well, Sarah’s personal letters, hinting, seducing, distancing
Is it the manipulative skill that arouses my enthusiasm?
Nothing is as it seems.

What Lawrence and Newcomb consider to be a futile plan, enables General Allenby to break through the Turkish front in late 1917 and advance towards Beersheba. With typical understatement, Verrier notes that Allenby won because he had information not only about the enemy but also about the area and its resources.

How the interpretation changes suddenly according to the interpreter and not the data – is that what motivates me?

Sitting in the library, regarding the betrayal of Belkind as a personal insult, furious at the neighbors in Zikhron Yaakov, understanding the traitors, the betrayed, thinking about the telephone call from Yehoyada, I seek again and again to
comprehend what impelled me to return to research on Nili. What right have I to touch other people, alive or dead, to project onto them interpretations of my own character?

And if you look for the guilt feelings, the devotion, the treachery, the hidden fervor of sensuality and eroticism, what will remain of the acts of bravery? The insensitivity of neighbors, Alexander’s envy and Zvi’s fury, the illusion of Sarah’s control…

Check the facts, Yehoyada fumed, just facts. Archives, letters, scraps of paper, and statistics.

You talk about facts, Yehoyada? There are no facts, there are as many facts as there are people who study them.

Perhaps, the alarming thought comes to me, and I push away the volume of letters, you’re not returning to Nili, you’re returning to Yehoyada.

Two days later I pick up the phone, hoping he won’t be in his office.

I’ve been waiting for you to get back to me. He sounds as if he’s smiling.

I didn’t intend to call back.

Still the frisky colt.

A disciplined mare now, I correct him crossly, pained by the truth.

Oh, come on, all I wanted was to know how you are.

Everything is fine. We’re getting to know one another, working, studying, like everyone else.

Wonderful, he says, I’m glad to hear it. Did he notice that suddenly I was unable to say ‘loving’?

I want you to be happy. You don’t sound cheerful.

Why, I’m the same as usual. I try to introduce cheerfulness into my voice. Why are you taking an interest all of a sudden? Has something happened?

Do you think something has to happen before I think of you?
There is an unfamiliar note in his voice, a new type of impatience, perhaps purposefulness. He continues in the same breath, *Will you find time to see me?*

Cruel compassion rises in me suddenly. An old man. His time has passed.

*I’d like to, I hear myself say, but we’re so busy now. We…*

*Dana,* he silences me forcefully, *I was happy to hear your voice. I wish you all the best,* and he puts down the phone.

Yehoyada prepared me for men. Years later Yoram prepared me for myself. In the meantime I am restless, pace the apartment, take out the garbage, lay the table, buy pewter candlesticks for the tete a tete dinner I’ve been planning for the past month but can’t summon up the will to organize it.

Our nights are better than ever, the days as well. There is sexual tension in the apartment and we make an effort to take pleasure and to propagate. We have been married for three years, no longer children, and it’s time to be like everyone else. Four more years will pass before we almost succeed, how many till we give up? I pace the apartment, afraid to pick up the phone, knowing he won’t call again, don’t want to cheat, do want to cheat.

Cheat, why cheat? We can meet somewhere neutral, have a coffee together, is that cheating?

Yoram insists, his hand on mine. *Go on, don’t stop.*

I scatter, shrink, and split. Part of me is concentrating on the tingling leg, the heated touch on the clitoris – that small lump of flesh, swollen erect – and part of me is observing Yoram; his focused expression, the self-confident calm with which he speaks, his hand on mine. Part says: Stop, don’t let him dictate to you, you’re the yardstick, not him. It’s uncomfortable? So move his hand away. Nothing simpler. Another part is fuming: Don’t go on, it’s forbidden. What will he think of you afterwards? Only a woman
who doesn’t cooperate is virtuous. You’re married; you’re not a whore…

*Don’t stop,* says Yoram, moving my hand with his. *Just for once go the whole way.*

He doesn’t give up, If he doesn’t give up why should I? We’ve been married for four years and I still don’t know what it feels like to come.

*You’re afraid to let go,* he tells me. *Strange, as if you’re punishing yourself.*

*I’m not.* It’s hard for me to speak; my throat is closed, strange pins and needles in the soles of my feet, only there, in the soft part, under the toes, in the rounded foot.

*Close your eyes, concentrate.*

With closed eyes, the body is transformed into a kindly, gigantic monster, enveloping you all around. Tiny soldiers are climbing inside me, pinheads.

*It prickles, that’s enough.*

*Concentrate. It’s nothing, concentrate.*

To be close so many times, almost there, and then retreat, and what does one need after all? Persistence, perhaps daring, a little self-love.

It’s not the first time that Yoram has insisted, but it’s the first time I’ve joined him. No wine, no hash not even a great deal of preparation, Just a night of enough, I’ve had enough and let’s try again.

Is this also different for all of them, all the other females?

I concentrate, as in yoga, close my eyes and try to drive away the pictures which crowd into my head forcibly, the bank overdraft, Imma’s scolding voice on the telephone, even the angry gesture of a work colleague – each in its turn. They leap up grimacing, burrow into the brain, and I strain, focusing there, only there, on the site of friction, hot currents flowing from the clitoris to the cunt, constricting it.
Like that, go on, he says.

Can you feel it?

Yes, shhh... don't talk; concentrate.

Hot, tightening, tightening and releasing and tightening again, heat draining from the pelvis to the vagina.

Go on, says Yoram, holding my hand hard against the clitoris.

Go on!

Can't, I pant, laughing, crying, the prickling beginning to climb from foot to calf up to thigh.

No, enough, I breathe.

Don't stop, he urges.

I continue to rub.

More, he says, and his other hand is in my body, but I don't know where. I'm hot, I'm cold, it's strange, not that I've never done this before, but always differently, delicately, climbing a weird and weighty path and fleeing at the last moment into a flat, disappointing peace, not like this time: decisive, insistent, an ingathering of accumulations, leaps, pounding pulse, pulsating muscles, the nape tensing, the neck, the face...

Concentrate. Yoram isn't giving in. Don't stop.

Enough, I'm almost shouting. I can't breathe.

And I can no longer feel the prickling, or the suffocation, focused there, reduced to a pinhead, a microfilm of my life, and suddenly, like water over a dam, the impossible level is breached all at once in a series of rapid and strong spasms, one after another. Gasping, smiling, tearful, I gauge the flood and open my eyes. The Bedrock is crowned with laurel and I thank him in amazement and satisfaction for his insistence. I have never experienced such pleasure, such languor.

But I still don't understand what Yehoyada meant, am incapable of admitting that I experienced pain.

Yehoyada prepared me for men. Yoram prepared me for myself, I won't forget that. Even if our lives fell into the anticipated abyss
between the ideal and the real, and he went off to seek other women till he found one, I know that I owe the patience of sex to him. I owe him gratitude for the key to the gate of delight. If I want to, I will use it, if I want to, I will lock it.

Foolish Dana. When you lock, what do you mean? Who cares if you use a key or not? Do you think your spasm or two makes a difference to them? That they understand that as long as you don’t come, you are on guard, with them on condition, there and not there? Maintaining distance, examining whether they are worthy enough for you to discard the self-control, careful to remain in control? Always. Particularly, at the moment of intercourse. So that they won’t think that they’re important, so that they won’t imagine that they have some influence that they exist here within you. There is not here. Here is not you. There is not you. Absorbed in the act of love, do you think it matters to them? After all, you are with them because they know that they are in you.

And what you do with yourself, that’s your problem.

Yoram prepared me for myself and I am grateful. In the morning I drive to work smiling, chat with people and smile. They think: What a pleasant woman, friendly, amiable, and I recall the nights of passion, his hands extracting hidden melodies from my body. A new range of pleasure has been revealed to me, softening involuntary muscles, oiling joints. The door of the heart will not squeak as it glides slowly to relief. Suddenly I discover how wonderful partnership between two human beings can be, how a love which did not commence with tremors and hungry desire can become a walled city, guarding against evil.

Yoram is tender. In the morning a slice of cake and a cup of coffee wait on the kitchen table. I too am tender. I leave a love letter on the pillow. ‘From me to you, mine is yours, you and I’
and all kinds of words that one believes while writing them, and when reading them after some time, sometimes a brief interval, sometimes long, one smiles forgivingly, if not with embarrassment.

The body is a gift from God; it should be pampered, said Yehoyada, but was referring only to himself. It’s good for the health, says Yoram, you know, sexual activity improves the circulation, lowers blood pressure, burns calories, stimulates the glands, extends life – and we burst into laughter. Why seek reasons when everything is so simple.

Now that I have achieved orgasm, I tell him, perhaps I’ll succeed in getting pregnant.
Chapter 19: Erga

A child that lives for six days, can you call it a child?
I don’t hold her, don’t nurse her, just stare at her, lying behind the glass walls of the incubator, wearing only a diaper, a tube in her mouth, another in her nose, yellow and plump, not like the skinny red bodies in the other incubators.

At least she’s big, I say to the nurse who accompanies me to the neonatal intensive care unit. Six incubators in the main room, sophisticated machines stretching out tentacles, beeping, roaring, ticking, delivering oxygen, heating. Dozens of plastic arms adhering to tiny bodies, invading them with hollow needles.

About her condition you should talk to the doctor, but first let me explain what all these machines do. It’s a little scary, isn’t it? she smiles at me.

Misinterpretation and fear intensify the ticking of the machines, each beep an alarm call.

I’m not scared, I say.

We try to give the newborn all the conditions they had in the womb, as if they were still in the placenta, without the liquid of course, she recites, regarding me to see if I’ve grasped her humor. The machines maintain body heat and provide an appropriate amount of oxygen when the lungs are not developed. They can monitor blood pressure, pulse, regularity of breathing, and warn about changes.

She has a tiny, sweet body. Lying on her back, hands clenched on either side of her head, five fingers on each. I count again, slowly to prevent error. Everything is in the right place. Feet as well, long toes with perfect nails. A needle leads a tube into the miniature heel. Doesn’t it hurt? Electrodes are attached to her chest, her belly, her back. Am I wrong or did she already have an additional needle in her head? In her arm? Eyes shut, eyelids swollen, elongated head with a black plume of hair.
Meanwhile no nutrition, the nurse continues, reading from the sheets clipped together in the plastic file on the adjacent shelf. She is being given liquids and drugs by transfusion. What’s in her heel is not a transfusion, it’s for taking blood, she answers, so that we won’t have to prick her each time. These are precious children, she smiles at me again, twelve hundred dollars for each day of hospitalization. And no, nothing hurts. They don’t feel pain at this age. The nervous system is not developed.

She’s big, I repeat, as if to myself, fatter than the others, a sign that everything will be all right.

Very good, the nurse confirms enthusiastically, not noticing my tear-filled eyes. You’re thinking positively. That’s the way!

In the faded hospital robe, still swollen, hair greasy and pinned in a ponytail, I intend to be a mother beyond compare. This tiny whole body is mine. It is me. Although I’m still forbidden to love it, although it could still escape me, I fight my terrors by repeatedly rereading the letters from other parents pinned to the cork noticeboard at the entrance to the unit. Each letter is a tale of survival and gratitude, decorated with colored crayon flowers.

If it succeeded for them, why not for me?

This time you’re a legitimate father, I laugh at Yoram sitting awkwardly beside me. Why don’t things work out for us. The laughter turns into tears without transition.

I think they did. He can’t stand tears. His eyes cloud over, fold in on themselves, and give me an empty look: You got pregnant, didn’t you?

Yes, but look what happened.

A perfect baby girl. These days they save babies born at six months. She’s a seven-month baby.

She’s not brea-thing, I bleat.

I’m going out for a cigarette, he says, OK?
Three women in a four-bed room, all of them with babies, two have had caesarians. Gila’s son is also in intensive care, and she goes up to the premature baby unit morning, noon and evening to pump out breast milk. *They’ve taken the feeding tube out of his nose,* she tells me happily. *Tomorrow I’m going home.* The portrait of a nursing madonna is reflected in her shining eyes. *They feed them from a tiny tiny glass bottle,* she measures between thumb and forefinger. *You’ll see. He’s so cute. They let me feed him today.* Her body leans forward as she speaks, cradling a newborn baby who is lying in another room, in a glass cage.

*He’s got the sucking reflux already,* she turns to me. Why me? *When he was born he didn’t know how to suck!* 

*It’s reflex, not reflux,* I have to correct her. *Can he grasp?*

Gila looks at me, hesitant. *You know, when you put your finger in his hand, does he grasp it?* 

*Ah,* she smiles, *oh sure, yes,, a strong grasp.* 

*It’s instinctive.* I can’t restrain myself. *The grasping reflex, it’s left over from when we were monkeys and fell off the trees. They grasp so that they won’t fall.* 

*No, really, what do you say?* she laughs, her eyes searching the room. 

*So they’ve taken out little Gili’s nasal tube?* We are joined by Tami, a woman in her late thirties who’s given birth to twins after fertility treatments. 

*That’s right,* Gila rejoices, *today.* 

*And are you breast-feeding?* 

*Soon, very soon. God willing,* she adds for safety’s sake. 

*Congratulations,* says Tami. 

*With the help of the Almighty!* 

*And the doctors,* I add maliciously. 

Gila greets her visitors ceremoniously, in a red toweling robe with a heart and arrow embroidered on the pocket, offers squares of chocolate from a golden box, giggles like a young girl. Twenty
roses, limp before they opened, are still on the bedside table.

I'll come and visit, she promises Twice a day I'm here and she
gestures with two fingers, to bring him milk.

A mother's reflex, I tell her.

Who's looking after the older ones? asks Tami.

Now? My mother and Yossi. My big boy's in school, my little girl's
in kindergarten, with God's help they'll manage. No big problem. She
sits down, pondering and sums up with a smile. I'll pump at home
and Yossi will bring it in a thermos flask, straight from the refrigerator.
Isn't it worth it? Her laughter rings out.

If only I were like her, I think, the perfect woman, Dana the
cow, Dana the milk-giver.

When Yoram comes, the smell of smoke precedes him.

I've brought you pralines, he says, handing me a blue rectangle
of sweetness: white nuts drowning in brown chocolate, wrapped in
heaven.

I spoke to the doctor, he whispers and my heart skips a beat. I
think you should know that she's still displaying fetal breathing and not
responding to medication.

For the second day, I say after a silence. A lump of rock is
weighing down my chest somewhere between the heart and the
throat and I wrap it cautiously, delicately, in soft fluff.

Girls have more fight in them than boys, he goes on with a
twisted smile. So there's a chance that everything will turn out OK.

She's plumper than the others, I say carefully. That also means
something. She's strong.

No, you don't understand. She's big because she's swollen due to the
birth trauma. It's edema, liquid not flesh.

So all those skinny red bodies are healthier than her? I cry with
gulping sobs.

Why do you have to think about the others? He is trying to
comfort me in his indirect way. In a few days time, she'll also be
skinny and red. Today she's already smaller than yesterday.
I grasp at the faint hope like a straw.

Sweetheart, Gila says, sitting down on my bed after Yoram has left, denting the mattress, don’t cry, sweetheart. Look, lovey, you can always have more babies; you’ve had one; you can have more, please God, fingers crossed.

Those were the words I repeated to myself a year later, two years, three, until in the fourth years I stopped.

You don’t have to be a mother. Some women make an ideology out of not being mothers, they even make a very good living from it. A woman is a human being, not a function. Thousands of words, dozens of books. A woman is a human being is a human being is a human being. Parenthood is part of a gamut, not necessarily an essential part. Some are blondes and some fat, thin, tall, short, amputees, cripples, some are smilers, angry, hungry, lustful, barren. So what? There are many fish in the sea yet the sea is not full. If everyone gave birth it would be full.

I am careful not to fall in love with her, try not to think of a name. Why go up to intensive care, see that tiny, tortured body fighting for its life? The respirator raises and lowers the little chest, inflates the immature lungs. Oxygen infiltrates the blood, reaches the brain.

Apgar 4, is written in blue pen on one of the sheets beside the incubator.

What’s Apgar, I ask the nurse.

Nothing, she replies, it signifies the condition at birth, it’s temporary, doesn’t mean a thing.

What’s the top of the scale, I ask, and she looks at me uncomprehending.

Yes, the scale, the numbers.

Like all numbers, 0 or 1 when you start counting.

No, from what to what.

Between 1 and 10, she answers unwillingly, evading my eyes.
What’s the best, 1 or 10?

10. But it’s temporary, you can see. If you’ve already read, then go on reading. After five minutes they stabilized her and it went up to 7.

Closing the plastic file demonstratively, she replaces it with a bang on the shelf under the incubator. Parents don’t have to read the file; it’s intended for the staff. She pronounces the words slowly, at dictation speed. Someone without the proper knowledge won’t understand it and will become anxious.

How long can the brain remain unaffected without oxygen? I ask the duty physician. Leaning on the unoccupied nurses’ station, having just finished a telephone conversation, he focuses on me with surprise, trying to connect face to name. In newborns it’s very flexible, the brain has the ability to circumvent, if it’s damaged it can develop other areas, not like adult brain damage.

He tries to smile, leisurely indifference between eyes and mouth. He’s trying to reassure me, I think to myself.

She’s no longer on 100 percent respiration, an elderly, motherly nurse greets me on Tuesday. Her warmth evokes involuntary tears in me.

A transparent plastic device is attached to the small, sculpted mouth, connected to a tube drawing sustenance from a wall plug.

It’s nothing, don’t be alarmed, she hastens to explain. We’re adding oxygen to be on the safe side, but she’s breathing on her own.

I’m not alarmed. Not me. It’s a miracle. Everything is forgiven, forgotten.

In two hours I am due to be released and go home. Noa will remain in the premature babies unit. Noa, or maybe Nofit, Rachel, Hadas? We haven’t decided yet. Dressed, still finding it hard to walk, I go up to the unit with Yoram. At the entrance we scrub our arms thoroughly up to the elbow with the dark red disinfectant, put on the sterile gowns, go in to say a brief goodbye, to pass a finger over the yellowish skin, which is beginning to redden.
To create contact, a sense of belonging, to guarantee recovery. A doctor and nurse are bending over our incubator, hiding her. What are they doing there? Next to her, why her? What does it mean?

Don't come in, a young nurse rushes over to us. Don't disturb them.

She's ours, I gesture with a hand. Has something happened? Nothing, she scolds me. Routine treatment.

Routine?

Go out, please, she repeats. Wait at the entrance or come in half an hour.

It's not treatment time, I tell Yoram. I know that. I know already. Let's go down. He doesn't react. She said routine so it's routine. In any event, we can't help.

I'm waiting here.

Let's go down for coffee.

I don't fancy any. I'll wait here.

You think I'm not worried? A 'what do you want of me' expression on his face. What good will it do to sit here. We're disturbing them and not helping.

You go. Drink something for me.

He turns his back on me angrily and goes. I knew he'd go. How could he not go, escape, and leave me alone? Of course it's hard for him. For me, too. His steps are measured, his back turned, and the muscles of my neck relax in relief. I try to concentrate on a new letter pinned to the notice-board: “Dear doctors and nurses. When our son was born prematurely our world turned dark”, but my eyes are drawn as if by a mighty magnet to the inner room. The doctor and nurse are still there. The nurse's movements are rapid as she hands him…. what is she handing him?

He takes it, what is he taking. He leans over, he straightens up.

Please go out to the waiting room. The young nurse is standing at my side. You can't wait here. I asked you to go out.

I'm on my way, I'm leaving. I'm not an enemy, I want to add but
what good would it do. Going into the waiting room I can sense dozens of eyes sprouting in my back, crying out to see, predicting catastrophe.

Seating myself on a white plastic chair, surrounded by stone or plaster walls which transmit nothing, I cling to the landscapes on the walls, Jerusalem, Massada, the water fountain devoid of cups, flee into a week-old crumpled newspaper, read and read and read and understand nothing.

Erga never left the hospital. It was foreseen, inscribed in her curriculum vitae before she was born: this child will not survive. She’s no Gideonite, why should she survive? Why grow up in order to gain flesh and guilt feelings? Isn’t it better to exist as an absence. To grow every day, every moment, by myriad invisible cells of disabling longing. To be vast, colossal, larger than life.

My tiny one, Ergati, my yearning.

I named her several months after her death. Erga, yearning — ke’ayal taarog al afikei mayim, as the hart yearns for water. A living creature could have been crawling around here now, I say to Yoram one evening, rocking forward and back, back and forth in the red-black rocking chair, which leaves tight balding marks on the living room carpet.

He doesn’t reply, his eyes on his book. In another year or two his ears will also be fitted with sensitive earphones, blocked against me.

On the carpet, on a clean sheet, like Dorit’s. She’d be crawling —
Why do you torment yourself, he asks finally, wearily.
I can actually see her, the pink nails, the little round bottom.
Stop it, I don’t want to hear this —
The elbow, you know, that fat crease in the bend of the arm.
Tell me, do you enjoy this talk, is that why you invent something new every day? Yesterday it was the doctors, the day before Dorit’s baby,
today –

I must. I think about her all the time. I –

So what. You're the only one who thinks about her- I don't? What do you achieve with this talk? Nothing. You simply enjoy picking at the wound, I don't. And he puts down the paper and goes off to his study, to a crowded cafe, to see one of his friends, on one of his long walks leading nowhere and he’ll return sweating and relaxed. He’s cruel, I repeat silently, quietly, not shouting it out, closed off, selfish, evil, I must get a divorce, I inform myself decisively. Pain-rounded tears slide down my cheek with a warm caress, softening the sorrow, slaking the regret. Dry sobs well up from my throat. I cry, truly cry, for Erga, for my marriage, for me – above all for me.

Erga, yearning. Twilight on Saturday evening, the day is turning grey, the shadows are lengthening and the soul is shrinking, crawling. Immeasurable longing descends on me, in the guise of a warm blanket, surrounding me entirely, seductively soft. Erga, like a hart yearning for the water. The air is suffused with it, its molecules, seep into the blood, intoxicated with pain, with expectation of change, which will never arrive. Twilight hours, torn between the sacred and the profane. Very soon the unpardoned, never to be pardoned sins will return, sevenfold stronger. The sin of the flesh and the sin of pride, the sin of adultery and the sin of deceit. And the greatest of all, the sin of anticipation, the failure to be content with little. God above, why did you make me so small and so yearning?

And what for?

If I had known, perhaps I could have found comfort. But I do not know. A faint breeze from the sea brings the smell of salt, somewhere nearby a cake is being baked, the taste of sweet vanilla consoles my nostrils and halts there. What did I do to deserve this terrible punishment, to yearn and ask and seek – to live with a constant sense of lack, to know that life is an absence, which
cannot be cured – and still to wait.

Weighty pining with no object. Profound yearning with thousands of reasons and no purpose.
Pining without remedy.
How can a human being who has no God pine when his pining has no haven?
With greater pain, greater resolve, greater persistence – and in vain.
And so - Erga.
Chapter 20: Waiting For You, Little Squirrel

It will soon be morning. Once I got up at an impossible hour to watch dawn breaking over the Santa Katarina monastery in Sinai. Intoxicated with beauty and longing, exhausted from the climb, darting envious glances at Dorit clinging close to Itzik, keeping a safe distance from one of his pals who was trying to get close to me. Army equipment, jeeps and officers’ uniforms, all broadcast self-confident, self-righteous machismo. And I was longing for a wrinkled old man.

You can’t see the sun rise in Tel Aviv. Even if you stand on a high roof, it will be revealed only when it matures, groping its way, red, between the roofs in the east where it is already light. What you can see in Tel Aviv is sunsets, beautiful ones. I used to drag Yoram to the Tel Baruch beach. Strolling towards the little airfield, distancing ourselves from dogs and people, we would sit down on hard, perforated, easily shattered sandstone, gazing at the sightless yolk as it sank slowly into the luxuriant blue.

Sitting side by side but not entwined, watching the slow sureness with which immersion is transformed into disappearance, not trying to describe or share, not crying out an idiotic: ‘Oh, how lovely’. Merely absorbing the shades of color reddening at the edges, spreading out into the distance, remaining colorful and vivid minutes after the sun has vanished. The twilight hours, which evoke dread when one is in bed, instill consolation and tranquility beside the sea. That’s the way of the world, to disappear in beauty, to lower the curtain slowly on an animated stage, to bathe in deep, living, darting blue, the lives of others. A vibrant colored sketch, which gradually fades, succumbs to darkness, absorbed by it.

Vicky. Come here! Vicky!

Even if she is dreaming now about her home and children, she must get up and help me. That is her life, that is my life. Before the
owls open their staring eyes within my belly, before the snakes of anguish speed to my brain, before the urine seeps through the pad. 

Vicky!

Yoram prepares a Chinese meal for the two of us. I make ready. With a fixed smile, wearing a golden kimono brought back from one of his trips, I come to the table. My shoulder-length hair is loose.

Eat, he says, adding soy sauce to the stir-fried vegetables. You need to gain strength.

I have no appetite.

He pours juice into a tall glass, heaps out rice, chews determinedly.

I've lost interest.

I don't force people.

Are you really hungry? I sound him out.

Mmmm.

This combination is very tasty, I try again after a few polite mouthfuls. How did you do it?

Oh, come on, not now. You know I like eating quietly.

We're good together, aren't we? I smile after the meal over an empty plate.

If we feel good, that's good. No need to talk so much.

Because it brings bad luck?

No, because of all the talk. You talk and think that you've done your good deed for the day.

What do you mean?

That you only think about yourself.

About myself? I repeat, wounded. Insult flavored with self-pity generates anger: What are you talking about?

Nothing. He withdraws, like always.

But in fact I always try.

Try what? To nag?
To hold a conversation.
To talk, that's all you know, about yourself.
Because you're not with me in anything.

Is that so? He looks at me mockingly, his dimple tightening with the familiar restraint, and I think: Where is all this coming from all of a sudden. Only two weeks ago we lost a daughter and already-

When you're needed, you're always not there.
So who drove you to all the tests? Didn't I cooperate in all those unnecessary treatments-

Yes, I say to him, as a chauffeur, a sperm donor, but even now-
That's exactly what I mean. You see everything from your narrow angle. I don't exist.

You idiot, I shout helplessly, just listen to me for a change.
There, you see; if I'd called you an idiot I don't know what you would have done.

Oh, God, I'm going crazy.

There is no God, he says and gets up from the table, and if there is, he helps those who help themselves.

We'll exploit the momentum, says Dr. Raanan, gynecologist at the hospital outpatient clinic. You succeeded in getting pregnant once, you'll succeed again.

Again we drive there and back, hoping and keeping silence. Again we try, pray, seek signs. Again it ends in almost and perhaps and once more, just once more.

I won't remind myself, I don't want to. Not now. A woman doesn't have to have children, even if she has that primeval, formless, atavistic emotion. A woman is a human being, not an animal. And if we live only once, which is indisputable, we mustn't waste that life on almost and perhaps and just once more.

And it's painful as well.
As well?
Yoram is sad, not because of me. Why would it be because of me? He has his own occupations. He is working hard and putting down roots in banks, and each rooting is accompanied by growing pains. I too have my own occupations, in addition to work: studying art, getting to know Billi, enrolling in shiatsu studies. I ask myself about once a month if it isn’t time to return to my Ph.D thesis.

Nine years of marriage, good-bad, bad-good and what is there between us if not quiet? There are almost no secrets any more: I’ve confessed about the Seducer, even about the abortion. Yoram sits in the leather lounger reading the sports pages. When he is away on one of his trips I stretch out in it. Cracked brown leather with a footstool and headrest. When he’s home, I sit in the rocking chair with its bright red and black upholstery. All the rest, as far as I’m concerned, can be thrown out, replaced, painted, burned. Rocking forward and back, as relaxed as a fed infant, I am absorbed in Le Carre, learning to appreciate the ability to be silent. Fortitude of soul, the courage of the short-distance runner within his thoughts.

Sometimes Yoram and I exchange impressions, tell one another affectionately who said what, when and to whom and so on. Yoram is a wonderful listener. Sometimes he feels the need for speech and he talks at length and I listen, What is there between us if not attention? Mature, understanding, considerate.

Sometimes there is nothing between us but anger. We return exhausted from treatment, devastated by an additional disappointment. You got up from the bed too soon, he grumbles, you’re irresponsible. You weren’t home, I say accusingly. A man sees a woman and seeks a child. A woman sees a man and seeks love. A married couple. What is there between us if not anticipation. Quiet, serious, gloomy.

Sometimes there is nothing between us but impatience. A man in his chair, a woman in hers. They get up, go into the kitchen, go into the bathroom, draw a curtain, close it, do the dishes. A faucet
is blocked in the kitchen. We need a dishwasher, they say. If there are no dishes in the sink, there'll be no squabbles. The refrigerator door is closed, opened. Doors. Closets. Dishes. Spoons.

A married couple. What do they have in their lives but routine.

Three years after the death of my daughter, my father died. My father’s death brought me Yuval.

Naked, we embrace. My hand moves up and down his back, his hands move down my back and cradle my buttocks. Yuval likes to kiss. Through the smell of the cigarette, the taste of childhood saliva reaches me. Mint chewing gum? Strawberry flavor? I no longer like invasive kisses, fearing germs, uncontrollable viruses. Don’t kiss strangers, I would have taught Erga if she had grown. Yuval’s cock lies rounded on his balls, not only bent but stubby as well. How long have we been meeting? Two years? Three? At this pace we could go on meeting for twenty years. It’s a shadow marriage. Some couples travel abroad, some men vanish to army reserve duty. But we love our spouses. We won’t deceive them. And in any case, it’s a waste of money.

Yuval caresses my breasts, his eyes closed. He is growing a double chin. We meet once every four to five weeks and at each meeting I discover a new detail. Sliding on his shoulders I rear up. His hands fall off my breasts and I crouch over him, lick his nipples, my fingers trail down his belly, I twist the line of black fur running from chest to loins. As he lies on his back, waiting, his flushed cock begins to harden and take on the familiar bend. Yuval surrenders to my touch. Seated between his legs, leaning over the curly triangle, I cover the blind, exposed head with my lips. It is craving for a touch. My rough, flexible tongue sketches widening circles around it and, excited, it responds, grows solid, soft-hard-smooth, rising and falling in my mouth as far as I permit it to reach, halfway down the palate, no more, so as to leave me breathing space. Yuval groans, shifts his pelvis, concentrates, his
eyes still shut.

*Sit here,* he points at his side. *I want to do it too.*

*Everybody gets a turn,* I say, rejecting the request. I continue to tighten my lips around him, one hand grasping the root of the cock, fingers curved, squeezing, relaxing. From time to time I release the pressure and slide them, moist with saliva and his secretions, along the inner seam, up to my lips. The other hand pins his pelvis to the bed.

Yuval is excited, rocks faster, his eyes open, staring at me, broadcasting-

*Your turn now,* I say, releasing him suddenly, enjoying the sight of his disappointment, wiping my mouth with a towel. Does Yuval love going down on me? Does Yoram love? I don’t enjoy going down on them, why should they enjoy going down on me?

*Why not rub on some chocolate,* Yoram begs, *you'll enjoy going down.* But a cock isn’t a popsicle and I prefer to chew chocolate, not to lick it.

Yuval’s tongue burrows between my legs and I concentrate on what he’s doing, businesslike. No cock can transmit the sensations that the tip of a tongue can evoke. Skittish, firm, rough, it launches spasms and crashing excitements, sets off sparks which spill into the capillaries, lighting bonfires.

His head is between my legs, and I clutch him with my thighs, raise my pelvis to his face. On all fours, buried inside me, his receding curly hair is hidden in my pubic hair, I can feel the muscles tensing, the heat gathering to the place of no return, and suddenly anger rises, damping the tension and calming the blood, allowing me to lower my legs from his shoulders back to the bed.

He lifts his head in surprise and stares at me for a moment. Misinterpreting my move, he stretches out, climbs on to my body and enters me easily, encompassed by moisture and odors, settles in, burrows in, pounds at me and my fingers press his flat behind and I observe his movements, interested and detached.
Shall I wait or did you come? His voice reaches me, whispering.
Don't wait.

He turns me over with a sweeping movement, lies beneath me then immediately turns me onto my back again, and launches a long series of increasing poundings, which, because of the wetness and the alienation, I feel only in my pelvic bones as he hammers against them with his own pelvis, with rhythmic strokes. The blanket has disappeared, perhaps fallen down. We are lying across the bed. His legs are tensed in the air, contracted, and a deep snort emerges suddenly from some primordial place in the depths of his body, and he contorts, relaxes, lies motionless, stunned, sprawled across me, limp, resting. After several seconds, which seem long, he rolls over slowly to lie beside me, his cock pulls out of me, damp and bent but less firm, and I get up hastily on my way to the bathroom, the wetness trickling down the inside of my thighs.

That's it, I say to myself in the mirror, like in a cheap movie: how long are you going to drag this out? There isn’t even any pleasure. What does he give you? What do you give him?

I'm not comfortable here, I say as I return to the room, seeing him half-dressed beside the bureau. This room is too functional.

The Hilton next time? he smiles.

A waste of money, I reply, enjoying the sight of him watching me, finding it hard to decide whether to protest angrily or smile approvingly, and preferring to keep silent.

Yoram is beginning to talk about open marriage and I understand him. Almost eleven years of marriage, bad-good, good-bad, and what is there between us if not attention?

I’d like to see you having sex with someone else, he says one night. I mean, to see someone else having sex with you.

After a brief shock, I rally. Why not? We’re not only failed propagation machines. We’re also pleasure machines. A casino of delights.
Do you have anyone in mind? I feel my way, perhaps he has heard something about Yuval.

No, that’s your side of the deal.

Deal?

Or vice versa. You can see me having sex with another woman. Do you fancy that?

Yes! I respond enthusiastically, and rally again. Do you have someone?

We can find someone. No problem.

Where?

Is there a shortage of possibilities? There are interested women everywhere. Just lift a finger-

No, where would we do it.

All the fun is at home.

Bring strangers home?

That’s funny, he ponders briefly, did you hear yourself? You didn’t say let a stranger into your body, but it bothers you to let a stranger into your home.

I don’t want a stranger, I protest.

But that’s the whole point. An open mind. Not someone you might get attached to, just someone who turns you on.

Nobody turns me on.

Why are you defensive?

I’m not defensive and not lying.

Then we have to do it as fast as possible, so that you’ll come to life.

We lie there quietly, a married couple, familiar with the crevices of the skin and the marks of time but not with the tunnels of the soul. I imagine Yoram hiding in the closet and watching Yuval and me through a peephole in the door, and Yuval is bending, sucking, licking and desire begins to gather in me, a kind of nervous itch of internal, lymphatic currents, gathering in my breasts, my cunt.

How about it now? I lay a hand on his chest.

You see, just the thought turns you on, he says with satisfaction.
Imagine how you’ll feel when you actually see it happening.

An unfamiliar female voice with an American accent asks if I’m me.
Yes?
Please, she says, I have a message for Dana.
Yes?
This is Joan, I’m Professor Jehoyada’s nurse. He asked me to call some people.
How is he? I interrupt and the momentary silence explains more than a well-formulated reply.
Ah—ah—stable.
What’s the message?
He’s asking you to come; he wants to give you an important book.
Can I talk to him? I am filled with pity.
I’m very sorry.
Can’t he talk? I don’t understand.
Oh, no, no, she laughs and then turns serious. He talks a lot. But his wife wants quiet for him. No telephone. Ringing disturbs him. It’s so that he can rest. Could you come tomorrow at ten? She concludes with a question.
Sure, I reply without thinking.

Yoram asks if I’ve found someone and I say no. Have you?
No hurry, he smiles, when we really want to, we will. A wave of heat rises in me towards him, I’m grateful.
You can be first.
Preferable together, so there won’t be any fallout.
No fallout. We’ve decided, haven’t we? You can be first. We’ll adapt slowly.
The newspapers are filled with lecherous ads, but we are not some bored couple who regard sex as an escape. We are a cultured couple, late thirties, reasonably young, very well-preserved, who
want to introduce temporary stimulation into their lives. We are not they. When I go to the bathroom, I take the appropriate pages with me and read them one by one. Each is more amazing than the one before.

*Have you seen how many ads there are?* I ask Yoram, as we sip our morning coffee.

*Are you out of your mind?* He lowers his cup. *Under no circumstances. Only with someone who’s not an actual stranger. I don’t want complications. Not at work, not from friends, not something that might develop,* he continues.

*What’s left?*

*We’ll find someone. It’s not a problem.*

*There are no guarantees in life,* I hear myself saying. *You can never know how things will develop*

*True,* he drawls, taking a last sip, *but you can control the intentions, and if we’re careful, he looks at me, and we’re sincere with one another, we won’t be taking a risk.*

*Only the truth,* I confirm. *We must. Only the truth.*

*Precisely.*


I met Berta at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, studying for a diploma in art evaluation. We call her Berta but her name is Billi. That’s not her name either, just the nickname her friends gave her. Her name is Bettina. That’s it, Bettina. Pink English complexion, emerald eyes like jewels. I call her Berta because of her harsh, masculine movements. How can a feminine body, full in the right places, slim in others, produce such masculine movements.

She finds Yoram appealing, that was immediately evident when I invited her to our house for coffee. We continue to meet after the course ends, though not often. Billi has many friends, unmarried like her. I’m just her secondary line of defense.
I come to you for proof that togetherness is also possible, she says, to know what I’m missing.

Gaining, I correct her.

No, she laughs, there’s good in everything bad.

And vice versa, I reply.

She was born in Argentina. Her laugh, gurgling deep in her throat, is contagious. Billi, I say, how does one learn to laugh like that?

When you’re three, she turns serious and then smiles, when they take your brother and Mama says laugh Bettina, laugh, he’ll be back.

She finds Yoram attractive. Her straight, white teeth smile at him from her open mouth. Her eyes light up when he comes to collect me from the café where the two of us are meeting.

He’s impressive, she tells me, and I feel as proud as if she’s complimented me.

She’s dangerous, says Yoram after a moment’s thought when I mention her name. She’s a lawyer. I don’t want to be sued for breach of promise.

You’ll make no promises and she won’t sue. Don’t you find her attractive?

Too pale, he answers immediately, and apart from that, I want to find someone on my own.

Her orange dress is driving me crazy. Isn’t there anything else she could wear? Vicky Victoria at my side with coffee and cake causes the familiar nausea to rise, still hesitating to climb from diaphragm to throat.

I don’t want it. Did I ask for it?

Chocolate - fresh, she shows me a muffin in a paper frill.

It’s dry; I want something wet, wet. Is that so hard to understand?

Cream?

Into the living room, I gesture with a hand, cutting short the conversation, the nausea.
“Go-od, liv-ing room,” she draws out the words, opens the closet door.

“That tunic,” I point to the transparent black fabric and she takes the tray into the kitchen, returns and pulls out the hanger, slips the sleeves of the pretty tunic over my raised arms, each movement requiring strength that I need to conserve.

The sun infiltrates the living room with radiant light, polishing the little bronze statuettes, reddening the carpet. Seated in the expensive leather lounger I feel as if I could glide away. Dana is sitting. Dana is flying.

Yoram thinks I’ve gone to see Dorit, but even when I’m in Jerusalem I’m in Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. Heavy, shaded buildings, second floor. The entire floor is his. Joan opens the door. Blonde? Brunette? Dark?

Dana? She surveys me with interest, and waves me in. A wall-to-wall carpet with small colorful rugs on it claims my attention. Round and square tables, mosaics of ivory and wood, scattered in every corner. Is this your home, Yehoyada?

Please come in. She leads me to a separate wing, which looks like the home clinic or office of a professional. A square waiting room and next door: Yehoyada’s sickroom.

It is hard for me to look. An old man is laying in a large bed, covered up to the chest, his arms at his sides, eyes glowing.

Dana, I’m glad you came.

‘I’m glad too’ is what I should say, but I can’t. How are you? emerges suddenly without volition.

As you see, he inspects me, it will be fine, beseder, that’s what we Israelis say, isn’t it.

I am saddened by the forced humor. Has it been a long time? Who’s counting?

Lifting his hand slightly, he gestures to me to sit down and the nurse goes out, as if this had been planned, and returns
immediately: a porcelain jug on a tray, teabags, a can of coffee, an assortment of cookies. We’ve been waiting for you, he smiles, his eyes twinkling and Joan goes out again, closing the door behind her with a click.

*Isn’t there anyone home? I wonder.*

*Helena’s weekly bridge club,* he replies. *Thank you for deciding to come,* he adds after a moment. *I’ve been waiting for you, little squirrel.*

The words sound heartrending. *I’m sorry I didn’t understand your telephone call then,* I apologize. *Yes,* he smiles, *it was on a whim.* *Is it a whim now as well?*

*What do you think?* He turns serious. *You were like fresh water in my gloomy life. I wanted to hold on to you. Now I want to say goodbye.*

The brown blotches on the back of his hands are blotted out by the ivory sheets. His thin hair is neatly combed. I come closer, begin to remove my clothes, slowly. Allow him to take a good look at the naked flesh at the waist, exposed as I lift my shirt. The breasts rise and fall free as the brassiere is removed. Each breast waits on its side, rounded, heavy, and summoning. I stand in front of him, upright. His pale face turns pink. *They’ve grown,* he whispers in his rich, beloved voice. *Please, Dana, let me touch.* I approach slowly, breasts lightly bouncing, lean over him, bend. With a sigh he stretches out a hand to feel, to cup, to live – but I straighten up at the last moment, my breasts moving away, and his face reflects the shock of surprise and pain.

Silence in the room. The steam from the boiling water in the jug whistles in my ears alone. Standing before him again, I continue to undress. Skirt, tights, panties. There is no shame between Yehoyada and me. One leg and then the other are raised and lowered. The black lace is reduced in my hand to a tiny strip. Erect, facing him, morning light enveloping my femininity, casting
a glow on curves, shadows on valleys. Revolving slowly, I allow him to absorb the sagging skin, the softness added over the years.

_Dana_, he groans.

Parting my legs a little I revolve again, watching him intently. His eyes look me up and down as he did at those first encounters. They cling, leechlike, seeking to suck. Easily, gliding, with tiny Chinese steps I approach him. His body shifts a little under the sheet, trying to move up, sit up, drawn towards me.

Oh, Dana, Dana, will you get under the blanket with him or not?
Chapter 21: Love in Times of Need

Friday night, Sabbath eve. Ancient Jewish tradition, perhaps because of the return from the mikveh, perhaps because of the ‘extra soul’ which descends from the Holy One blessed be He to the material world.

Billi is due to arrive, and the three of us know what we are going to do.

*I met her in the second-hand book store, by chance, Yoram reveals a week ago. We went off and had a coffee together. She's nice.*

*I'm glad.*

*I thought about what you suggested.*

I am silent, awaiting his phrasing.

*Perhaps we can do it.*

Bravo, businesslike. Leaving room for retreat.

*Why perhaps?*

*Perhaps you've changed your mind.*

*Why would I? She seems exactly the right type.*

*Type? She's a human being, not a type.*

*Of course, I say, in a tone of ‘Come on! You know what I mean’.*

*No, I don't. She's right because she's single? In my opinion it would be better if she were married to a man you fancied.*

*She's right because I don't think you're capable of falling for her.*

A flash of satisfaction in his eyes.

*Absolutely. So shall we fix a date for next Friday?*

*Who is going to tell her?*

*You can, but I'd rather it was me.*

*OK, I say, clever fool that I am.*

*At her place or ours?*

Yoram prefers ours. So does Billi. At the beginning of the week I call her.
Billi Bettina? I say in a soft lingering voice.

Hi, Dana, she responds happily. I'm glad you called.

Yes. We need to talk.

Want to come over?

Gladly, but it won't work out, I-

OK, we can do it by phone. She cuts short the hesitations. I'm really glad you called.

So what, you'll come to our place on Friday?

What a way of putting it, she laughs. Just a moment. I gather from Yoram that you also want to, is that right?

Right.

I told him it's not enough for him to say so, we need to talk, all three of us.

No, really, there's no need.

I can hear in your voice-

No, it's OK. I was the one who suggested you.

You did? Really? Great. It's a compliment. Do you permit me to take it as a compliment?

That's enough. I'm flattered. It'll be fun.

Ahh – can I bring something?

Perhaps a condom, I want to say but say: Nothing. Really, nothing, you're a guest.

Billi arrives at ten thirty with a tall baked cheesecake and a bottle of French Chardonnay. Look, I whisper to Yoram in the kitchen, she's brought herself and some refreshment as well.

She's generous, he glows at me. I haven't seen him so lively for some time.

How come it didn't collapse? I ask, bringing in plates heaped with slices of her cake and the cake I bought.

I baked it in water, she smiles. Look me in the eye, Dana, do you really not mind?

Truly, truly, scout's honor. I raise two fingers.
Fine, so what are we waiting for? We can eat afterwards.

We've found exactly what we need, I whisper to Yoram in the bathroom and he nods in my direction and disappears hastily towards the bedroom.

Give them a little time, I decide, slipping on a transparent black slip, loose on my naked body. I comb my hair slowly, parting my cropped hair on the left, remove the silver earrings, rub fragrant cream into my elbows, nape, behind my knees, a little eau de cologne under my breasts. Why are you titivating, for whom?

I won’t make them wait for long.

Yoram and Billi are sitting side by side, chatting quietly. There is a strange, unlikely ease between them. I am tense.

How’s it going? I lie down beside Billi, on my regular side of the bed, the south.

Come here, says Yoram.

Hi, Danush, she flutters her eyelashes at me.

We've been waiting for you, says Yoram, looking at me. I look too. At Billi. It is hot in the room, no need for blankets. Her body is pink and white and solid, her breasts small, shy, with long, erect, thin pink nipples. I shift my gaze from them. They make me nervous. Slim waist, beautiful hips, wide like in old paintings of women, highlighting the triangle of thick, black curly hair.

She rests a hand on my waist. Her body heat through the thin cloth is disturbing. Take it off, she says, be like me. Nothing at all.

Go on, I say, I’m here. Go on.

He’s not hard, I note with satisfaction as Yoram embraces Billi, kissing her eyes, her neck, and she takes her hand off me and hugs his shoulders, bringing her splendid pelvis close to his thighs. Her wide ass is turned towards me. An appealing triangle and a dimple smile at me above the meeting place of the buttocks.

I pass a caressing hand over her back, move down to the rump. Her body quivers and she moves closer to Yoram, sliding her breasts against his wide smooth chest.
Yoram is not hard, I am glad to see again as she slithers to his other side and he lies between us.

She doesn't turn him on, I think happily.

_**Now stroke each other**, he says, sitting up on a corner of the bed.

Billi grasps my breasts suddenly and I tremble with alien sensations. This isn't her first time, I think, the trace of a smile trapped on her lips, her gaze focused on me, following me, both direct and vague. Cupping and squeezing in turn in caressing waves she instills in me new unfamiliar tremors.

_Danush_, she whispers in my ear, _let's put on a performance for him, you want to, don't you?_

Want to or not, what does it matter what I wanted or will want. Billi’s hands are good, hard-soft, playing slowly, painlessly, wherever possible, wherever necessary. Yoram gets up from the bed and sits in the armchair. Where did it come from? When did he bring it in? Stroking his cock, he watches us, concentrating, eyes alien. Billi’s hands are on me.

_You're mine now_, she whispers in my ear.

I am split into thousands of parts, confused, my senses separating, my nerves stimulated, and my pelvis begins to rise and fall uncontrollably, my legs try to circle her hips, to hold on, but she lowers them abruptly, harshly, and suddenly Yoram is crouching at my side, she moves away and he is in me, as if I had asked him, by what right? How come he has entered me? What is he doing there behind my back? Her hands are caressing his nipples, pinching, down to his groin, then on me, pinching, penetrating, joining him, pushing him further into me, fleeing, and he is moving in and out, out and in, almost unfelt because of the wetness and the dizziness. His face contorts as one of her hands disappears, buried somewhere in his ass. Gasping, shouting, he looks up at the ceiling, her face smiles at me from above him, and he detaches from me suddenly, turns to her, and she lies on her back, at my side, spreads her legs for him, her right leg on my body...
and again I am befuddled, neither here nor there, more turned on than I have ever been, not with Yuval, not with Uri, and who remembers Yehoyada. Who needs a man? Rising and falling inside her, he buries his face between her breasts, back bent. She turns her head towards me, stretches out a hand, tries to reach my thighs.

*Focus on him,* I say to her, *it’s all right* and Yoram halts for a moment, gazes at me bewildered. *Just a moment, I want you to come.*

*No, go on,* I say angrily. *I want to come by myself,* and they writhe for a moment, a groan or two until he moves out of her, his cock wet and erect, seeking a place to butt against, turning to me.

*I want to see you,* I object.

*You first,* he says.

Again she crouches over me, massaging my breasts. Yoram positions himself between my legs, lifts my pelvis and places a pillow under it and between them, her hands reach for the clitoris, massaging it as only a woman knows how, his cock adapted to her movements. I scream, writhe, don’t know how and what and where, that is, I know but I can’t resist.

*Why resist,* Dana? Lovemaking is sex only sex. The era of nausea has passed.

*I didn’t go to see Yehoyada.*

*Of course,* I said to Joan on the telephone. *I’ll be there tomorrow at ten,* never doubting my intentions. A sick man is asking for a meeting. An old man wants to see a young woman. A dearly beloved wants to see a dearly beloved. I’m coming, Yehoyada, I’m coming on the run. You needn’t even whistle.

As soon as I put down the phone, I imagined how I would arrive. The door opening immediately, the cool gloom of the rooms. No, the door won’t open at once. Joan will open it, or his wife, or whoever, and he will be lying down or sitting up. Will he get up to greet me? Will he be able to get up? The silence with
which she responded to my question about his health is ominous. He’ll probably be lying down. Perhaps he’ll be asleep, doped with drugs? No. If he went as far as to ask a strange nurse to call me, I can assume he’ll be awake. How do you know you were the only one he called? Perhaps he invited all his male and female friends from old times? Really, Dana, you’re undervaluing yourself again. He asked you to come once before, years ago. So let him ask. What do I care? He got his pound of flesh from me when I was young. And he gave you something. What did he give me, nothing, just took. That’s not true, the sensitivity, understanding of the story beneath the story, the awareness within the awareness of unawareness, and the desire without fulfillment, the distance and the encounter between pain and pleasure.

He took. And gave. And took.

I didn’t go to Yehoyada, although all the remaining day and the evening that followed and the chill morning, all of them thought I would go.

I’m going, I told myself that evening.
I’m going, I decided that night.
What a question. At nine o’clock I’ll start preparing, I said in the morning.

I’m going round to Dorit, I informed Yoram a moment before he went out.

Have a good time, he smiled, closing the door behind him.

Why this need to report my movements? Not the need to tell the truth, but to report. Alone at home, I wander around restlessly, go out onto the balcony, watching the children with their book-bags, chained to a new day’s study, return to the kitchen, wipe up a little spill on the black granite counter, go back to bed. Ach!

Instead of going to Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, I drove to Jerusalem. No way back. Wandering restlessly among the
bookshelves, looking for a quiet corner, going out, buying coffee in a plastic cup, drinking half, returning. If he calls home, there will be nobody to answer. He’ll wait and wait till he understands. Did you give her my address? He’ll ask Joan hopefully, knowing only too well that I remember his address by heart. How could he know? I do in fact remember, but how could he know that? Perhaps she got the time wrong, he’ll say regretfully to Joan. Lying in bed, he is convinced that he is of no importance to me, that he never was, that this is the way of the world. Young women forget, they are ungrateful. Again you know what he’s thinking, putting into his mouth thoughts that suit you? He’s not like that. He has a different style, different thoughts. And still it’s obvious to me that he is waiting for me, every minute checking the clock on the wall or his wristwatch, lonely, sunk in contemplation, recalling his hands on my virgin body, evoking in me…

I leave the library in a frantic state, hasten to the public telephone.

Oh, come on, says Dorit when I finish talking, you have a talent for complicating things.

What shall I do? I plead.

You could have said you’ll try to come, not promise.
But I wanted to go when I talked to her, I wanted to. I still want to.

So what are you doing in Jerusalem instead of Tel Aviv?
That’s precisely the question.
Don’t you see that you’ve already answered it? If you’re here, that means that you don’t want to be there.

But I’m dying to be with him, I whisper.
Then go, stupid, she replies angrily. Take a taxi and go.

Now they turn to one another, he to her, she to him.
Nature created us with orifices and cavities. Three can celebrate
on one female body, but we will always be female versus male, versus male, versus male. Her white body is perspiring; there are damp patches on her skin. His smooth body clings to her and pulls away, and their dampness produces sucking and farting sounds. I laugh. They don’t hear or perhaps they do because he lifts himself up and lies on his back. She climbs on top of him hastily, his legs stretch out convulsively. She’s good, I think, she’s great, really experienced. Yoram is breathing heavily. How many years is it since I heard him breathe like that? Many. What do I feel? Hungry? Exhausted? Faintly jealous? I don’t exist. His dark hand on her pale skin creates a negative on my retina. What is he feeling, what is she doing to him? Is it very different from me? Billi-Berta is assertive, skilled, as she presses down on his pelvis, her leg muscles sinewy, no soft folds round her waist.

I’m not capable of sitting and climbing like her.

No, they’re boring me. If I weren’t afraid of offending them I would get up, bring over my P.D. James and lie beside them, reading.

When they come, two hours from now, will they reduce the intervals between pills or change them? Good morning! Michal’s brisk voice will echo from the doorway, adopting the cheerful tone of a youth instructor. Good morning, Vicky will reply in her fresh, foreign voice. I will reply too, even smile. You look wonderful, Rochka-Surka will come over, smiling warmly. Thank you, I’ll reply sincerely and Dr. Hockstein will sit down on the couch beside me and hold out a cool hand. I heard that you were in pain yesterday. Tell me exactly when. Her eyes on the notebook, the only doctor who doesn’t ask where it hurts and what kind of pain it is, and doesn’t take out a stethoscope.

The notebook, the drug diary, each detail in the routine of my life is recorded precisely by Vicky, and I check to make sure she makes no mistakes.
‘The angels of mercy’, the Bedrock calls them, but I can’t agree.

We are sitting on the high bar stools. I sat here with Yuval as well, just like this, after the first time at my home. Burning feet on the low wooden strip, elbows on the wooden counter. Yoram is preparing a hot drink for all three of us and I propose moving to the living room. Berta and I carry in the plates, sugar, little milk jug; all shining nickel utensils and I flop down on the couch with a sigh of release. Billi, all smiles, contemplates me.

*It was good,* I smile back at her.

*Good for a start.* Her smile focuses on Yoram, coming in from the kitchen with three cups- tea, espresso and Turkish coffee.

*What are you talking about?* Dana says it was good, she quotes me and he observes me inquisitively.

*That’s true, something else, special,* I try to define without hurting him and without lying.

*It was OK for me too,* he says cautiously, as if I hadn’t seen his contorted face or heard his ragged breathing.

*Have you ever done it before?* I ask her, my tone casual, but watching her expression.

*Nothing human is alien to me,* she gives her infectious laugh and I join her, no longer capable of asking again, of demanding a clear reply.

Yoram and I escort Billi to the door.

*Wait, I’ll take you down to the car,* he volunteers, looking at me.

*It’s three in the morning, not pleasant to go into the parking lot alone.*

*Right,* I confirm with excessive enthusiasm, *see you, Billi, bye.*

There is thick muddy darkness outside and I dim the living room lights. Pleasant languor rises from the soft armchairs and I sink into one of them, eyes closed, hearing the sound of crickets, the shriek of a falcon, a whole world out there, turbulent,
predatory.

Yoram returns and locks the front door.

_Coming to bed?_ I say flirtatiously, desire rising in me suddenly, demanding ownership.

_I want to listen to Wagner. I'm not tired_, and he shifts an armchair and removes dishes from the table.

I jump up; hasten to stack them in the dishwasher.

_Did you talk on the way?_ I ask.

_Nothing special_, he replies.

His earphones are already in place. Heavy silence in the house. Slowly I go off to shower, then to bed. Disquiet flows in the blood, stirring up troubled wakefulness. With sudden decisiveness, I change the bed linen, throw the sheet and pillowcases into the laundry basket, too lazy to change the blanket cover, tighten the corners of the new sheet to the mattress, and smooth the pillows. A pleasant smell of clean linen. The room is ceremonial. The walls don’t cry out. Exhausted and satisfied I lie down on my back, waiting for sleep, which does not arrive. I toss and turn, contemplate and decide to masturbate – better than counting sheep.

The sun is shining but I am cold. What’s flowing through my veins, if at all. Is it bloodless blood? Vicky covers my legs with the tartan blanket that Yoram and I bought years ago in Ireland, blue, red and green squares, fringes folded on the carpet.

_Very nice_, she smiles at me.

I smile back.

She brings me peeled halved grapes and a grated apple, inserts a teaspoon of apple in my mouth and waits for me to swallow. If I only could, I would eat by myself, but my arms are weighed down by iron weights, pinned to the armchair. A spoonful of apple mush and then half a grape. Another spoonful of apple and another half grape. The regularity drives me crazy.
Stop it, I shout. Enough.

I haven’t the strength to explain. What for? I’m not hungry in any case. When the hospice women arrive (Why are they all women? I wonder who heads the department, probably a man), what will I say to them? Give me some appetite pills?

Translucent, heavy, seated, floating, I see everything, hear everything, and understand more than ever what I once failed to understand. A day and another day and another day, each lovelier than the one before.

Berta comes every Friday evening and after she goes we joke, sometimes talk, sometimes exchange signs.

*She moves like a man,* I say.

He confirms it.

*You’re attracted to her. At first you didn’t have a hard-on. Now that doesn’t happen.*

*When will you bring someone so that we can talk about him as well?*

*Soon,* I promise, knowing I won’t do it.

Sometimes I still toy with the idea of giving up my secret, and drilling a peephole in the closet so that Yoram can sit there, to see Yuval and me, rolling about, licking, and making love. But in order to do so, I’d have to start by explaining how I met him and where and the time that has lapsed would arouse argument and mistrust. And if I talk to Yuval, he’s sure to refuse or will want to bring Tamar along. I haven’t the strength. I haven’t the desire. Why spoil what is already stable?

Bettina calls me in the mornings, comes over on weekday evenings, invites me to movies, joins us on Shabbat rambles. I observe her, lurk in wait, and am on my guard.

*Two nights at the Nirvana Hotel at the Dead Sea?* says Yoram.
Two rooms. We'll have salt baths, massages and you know what else.
You two go, I say, it's hot enough here.
There's air conditioning, he refuses to listen.
She's stubborn, he tells Berta on the phone.
She says she'll bring someone for you, he repeats what she's said for me.

Tell her not to dare!
They laugh, the sound of her voice reaching me through the phone. OK, OK, he says, ending the conversation, with a satisfied expression.

Are you seeing one another without me?
Yoram freezes for a moment, looking at me.
Why do you ask?
Dunno, no particular reason. Are you?
No, he says, not now.
When?
At the beginning.
Be careful, I say, seemingly indifferent, sometimes people fall in love in these situations.
I'll keep to the limits, he watches me. What do I lack now?

Sometimes I meet Yuval in the mornings and wait for Berta and Yoram at night.
Berta, the magic seasoning.
She's dangerous, I tell Yoram one evening after she's gone.
What happened?
Nothing, but it could happen. She's clingy.
A sign that it's good for her.
That's what's dangerous.
Since when is dangerous good? Don't tell me that things aren't good for you.
That's why we should stop. If it's difficult for you, I can talk to her.
Instead of stopping, we should bring in someone.
And then we’ll no longer be able to be just the two of us.
It’s already difficult, he says. Why do you think I didn’t have a
hard-on the first time? Because of you.
I thought it was because of her.
I’m glad that’s what you thought. It’s an unpleasant situation.
I find it pleasant.
So why do you want to stop?

How many such arguments did we generate over the years,
scrupulously clarifying our positions, merely dead-checking.
Vicky, where are you, Vicky, come here.
Only three months and she’s already disappeared.
She’s beginning to neglect her duties.
Oh, here you are, turn on the TV, please. No, no, no, another
channel.
OK now? Vicky switches channels and smiles at me. What
is hiding behind her narrow eyes? A blue-haired girl in a leather
mini is swiveling her hips among clouds of smoke, kneading a
microphone, pressing it to her lips. Her voice fills the room, low,
aggressive, she doesn’t know how to sing but she knows how to sell
herself.
Thanks, Vicky, leave it, it’s OK, I like it. You know, I add
suddenly, I like you too.
Her slanting eyelids open wide for a moment, exposing an
astonished, smiling brown eye.
I like you too, Da-na.
A wave of affection and sweetness goes through me, gliding
across my skin. How pleasant life is.

A bitter dryness in my mouth, and the sips of mineral water
only relieve it for a moment. That damned fungal infection. Did
we do the daily treatment today?
No, as usual she forgot the mouth rinse with soda and lemon,
the fungicide.

Vicky!!!

She’s disappeared again. Perhaps she’s gone down to the store, to the giant supermarket, to catch some fresh air there like in church, to forget the troubles. What troubles? What wouldn’t I give to be roaming round there now, surrendering to forms, colors, shelves.

Vicky!

Has she really gone?

Lying slumped in the leather lounger, panic-stricken, my panic is compounded by burning pain, as strong as a slash, concentrated in the lower spine, in the pelvic bones squashed against the seat, in each protruding joint. That’s all I need now, pressure sores. I’ll start stinking.

Vicky!

Da-na?

Where were you, you cow?

OK, Dana? Her voice is soft.

She straightens her skirt. I hear the flush of water in the bathroom. Vicky’s a good girl, a good girl. Hu-rts, I tell her, showing my mouth, poking out my tongue, placing a finger on my lower back. Hu-rts.

She looks at me helplessly.

Want to drink?

No. Ointment. I make massaging gestures with my hand.

Again?

Again? And only when she lift me and sets me gently on the couch, lifting the tunic and blouse and beginning to massage the painful places with the white ointment, do I recall that we did in fact do it this morning, before breakfast and a pinch of surprise goes through me: if you can’t remember what happens today, what truth is there in your other memories?
Billi-Bettina-Berta rises from the river of forgetfulness and returns there. Yuval is swimming alongside her and Yoram and Uri. And Yehoyada. Lifting a panting head out of the water, diving like stones to the bottom, choking. So many years have gone by since then. Brown heads, curly, light, graying, round, balding, mischievous, serious, all swimming there, floating among the foaming waves, spraying bubbles. Each head is a world.

If you’ve known one, you’ve known them all.
And still you know nothing.
They are in the water, I am on the shore, should I say – safe on the shore, observing, my eyes closed. The warm sand adapts itself to my bones. Vicky is massaging the small amount of flesh that remains. Her hands are hard and warm, passing persistently over each protrusion, with the dedication of a hired worker, curving, penetrating between the ribs, a woman's hands are touching me.

Not pity, not craving, just care.
Care too is love, perhaps the only love there is in times of need.
FOUR MEN AND A WOMAN

Dana, a woman in her early 40s, has reached a critical point in her life. Grappling with a severe illness, she lies in bed for hours on end, reconstructing her past. Her only antidote is her memories of the four lovers who mark the various stages of her sexual development. What effect have they had on her? How do her choices reflect who she is? Can she distinguish between her own desires and those that society has conditioned her to have? Clinging to the details of her life, Dana is at once marshaling her sanity and attempting to make sense of her choices, her achievements, and her failures. In a patchwork of intricate storytelling, associatively interweaving past and present, she recounts the stories that have shaped her.

Four men: Yakir, an aging professor, introduces Dana to the emotions and sensations of the tantalizing, exhilarating world of love. Uri, a serious student who has meticulously mapped out his future, ostensibly offers Dana the opportunity for the true fruition of a relationship. But an unavoidable decision marks a turning point from which there is no return. Dana finally meets the man she knows she is destined to marry; their childless marriage, however, slowly drives them apart. Then there is Yuval, a childhood friend, who re-enters her life unexpectedly but only peripherally.

As she reassembles her fragmented memories, Dana allows herself, and us, to examine the fine borders between the respectable and the promiscuous, the moral and the corrupt, truth and falsehood, denial and recognition. Through Dana's continuous, agonizing fluctuation between two opposing facets of her personality - the femme fatale and the "good girl" - Shulamit Gilboa presents a unique, unmediated account of the female experience, questioning societal norms and expectations, their effect on the female consciousness; and their sometimes invalidating and detrimental consequences.